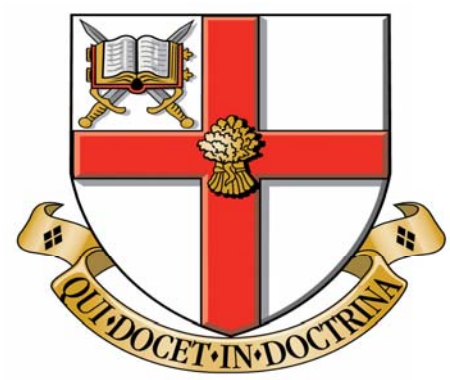

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Interfaith dialogue and the significance of difference:
Considering Legenhausen's non-reductive pluralism as a basis for Muslim-Christian dialogue

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Abstract

This research focuses on theories of interreligious dialogue and Muslim-Christian dialogue specifically. The aim is to examine whether Legenhausen's non-reductive religious pluralism, rooted in Shi'a theology, is a successful solution to the problem of difference involved in Hick's (reductive) hypothesis. Such a study is important because it investigates what types of theories of interreligious relations are "difference-respecting" in the sense that they are capable of recognizing the significance of religious and cultural differences as invaluable resources for interfaith dialogue. The research approach adopted is a critical analysis of the relevant literature, undertaken from a philosophical/phenomenological perspective. The findings are that Legenhausen's position does not solve the problem of difference to a satisfying degree because a) it is based on inclusivist thinking and thus faces the charge of spiritual superiority and b) by excusing differences between Muslim and Christian beliefs by reference to the concept of *qasir* (incapability), it does not take otherness seriously, which makes it even more reductive than classical pluralisms. The main conclusion is that a truly egalitarian account of religions, sensitive to issues of difference, needs to bridge the gulf between objective observer perspectives (adopted by pluralists) and insider views on interfaith issues (promoted by religiously specific approaches like Legenhausen's). As an alternative theory it is therefore recommended to combine the best of both approaches into a (religiously non-specific) model of witnessing, based on minimal ethical pluralism.

Keywords: interreligious dialogue, Muslim-Christian relations, religious pluralism, religious difference, Hick, Legenhausen

The work is original and has not been submitted previously in support of any qualification or course.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

> 'Religion can be a source of discord. It can also be a form of conflict resolution. We are familiar with the former; the second is far too little tried. Yet, it is here, if anywhere, that hope must lie if we are to create a human solidarity strong enough to bear the strains that lie ahead. […] That will require great courage, and perhaps something more than courage: a candid admission that, more than at any time in the past, we need to search – each faith in its own way – for a way of living with, and acknowledging the integrity of, those who are not of our faith. *Can we make space for difference*?' (Sacks, 2003, 4-5, my emphasis)

1.1. Background

Constructive interfaith dialogue, in particular between Christians and Muslims, is not a new phenomenon. At various times in history and in very diverse contexts, religious leaders, scholars and laypeople of both faith traditions have engaged in interreligious exchanges, furthering tolerance, trust and mutual understanding. Classical examples of such Christian conciliatory approaches towards Islam, as Bennett specifies in *Understanding Christian-Muslim Relations* (2008), are the Nestorian Mar Timothy in the eighth century CE; a number of works and letters written around the time of the crusades (Lull, Bacon, Assisi); and in the modern era, Gairdner's and Massignon's theological perspectives (Bennett, 2008, 89-113). Similarly, Bennett claims, classical Muslim approaches aimed at conciliation with Christians are found in Muhammad's encounters with followers of the Christian faith as reported in the *Hadiths*; in the works of Arabi in the classical medieval period; and in Khan's modern view on the possibility of Muslim-Christian friendship (Bennett, 2008, 138-162). Today, however, increasing global interconnectedness, on the one hand, and a growing awareness of religious and cultural diversity at local levels, on the other – especially in Western societies – has made the promotion of mutual knowledge even more essential.

Drawing on Cantwell Smith's *Towards a World Theology* (1981), King argues, for example, that the current shift from regional identity-formation to our global interdependence in not only economic and political, but also spiritual matters 'sets the challenging task of how we can meaningfully learn from each other in mutuality and trust' in this postmodern age (King, 1998, 41).

The theoretical framework, on which Western theological discourses on Christianity's relationship with other faiths are commonly based, is the tripartite model of exclusivism, inclusivism and religious pluralism introduced by Race in 1982. To understand the wider context out of which this research evolved, it is necessary to briefly define these concepts: Exclusivists such as Spencer or the Caner brothers on the Christian side and Deedat on the Muslim side claim that only their religion is true (e.g. leads to salvation) and that other religions are therefore misled (Spencer, 2003, 2006; Caner and Caner, 2002; Deedat, 1981, 1984, 1990). Christian inclusivists like Rahner (1966), Cragg (2002, 2005), Jomier (2002) or Khodr (1981), by contrast, are convinced that other religions have salvific significance, but only by virtue of the hidden, unrecognized redemptive work of Christ in them. In other words, Christianity for them has a soteriological power stronger than that of other religions, thus being capable of including in its salvation members of other faiths whether they are aware of this or not. Although adopting a more conciliatory perspective on interfaith relations than exclusivists do, inclusivists therefore cannot rid themselves completely of the traditional claim of Christian superiority, so characteristic of exclusivism. Similar positions regarding the soteriological quality of Islam are found in contemporary Muslim thinkers like Askari (1991, 1992), Esack (1997), Hussain (2006) and Talbi (1990). It is important to realize, though, that the historical focus on clarifying one's own position in relation to other religions stems from Western Enlightenment thought

when pioneers of comparative religion applied the methods of rational investigation first to the various Christian denominations and then to other religions (Harrison, 1990). As Masuzawa therefore objects, Race's threefold typology – like the concept of religion itself – could also be viewed as a Western Christian invention imposed onto other cultures as a hidden means to preserve 'European universalism' (Masuzawa, 2005).

To distance themselves from this charge of Eurocentricism, numerous Western scholars of religion, especially those coming from liberal Protestantism, are now suggesting that increasing religious diversity in postmodern, democratic nation-states can only be met appropriately by a replacement of the traditional exclusivist and inclusivist approaches by the third and supposedly more egalitarian model of interreligious relations, religious pluralism, as promoted for example by Hick in *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989)[1]. Religious pluralism, according to Hick, is the view that all major religions are different ways of experiencing, and hence responding to, the Divine or, as he puts it, the ineffable Real. (Hick, 1973 [1996], 37-40; 1989, 99-102). Religious traditions can therefore be seen as alternative soteriological spaces founded – despite their differences in belief and practice and irrespective of conflicting truth claims – on a common core: the goal of teaching people the way from self-centredness to 'Reality-centredness' (Hick, 1973 [1996]). As equally valuable fragments of the origin of the world, individual religions therefore have strong reasons to engage in dialogue, as equal partners or even members of one family (Hick, 1973, 146). It is in response to this view of religions, so influential among proponents of

[1] Examples of contemporary pluralist scholars influenced by Hick are Kaufmann, Knitter, Radford Ruether, King and Race.

interfaith dialogue today, especially within the developing field of the theology of religions, that the following discussion is to be understood.

1.2. Research focus

There are many objections to Hick's pluralist hypothesis, some of which will be discussed briefly in Chapter 2. The primary research focus of this work, however, is a particular argumentative contradiction involved in religious pluralism – here referred to as "the problem of difference" – as well as a recent attempt at solving this problem: Legenhausen's *non-reductive* corrective to Hick's theory. The contradiction, to which MacIntyre (1985) et al.[2] object can be summarized as follows: Hick's pluralism can be accused of being *reductive* in two problematic ways. First, by reducing religious differences to the lowest common denominator (here: human striving for Reality-centredness), it does not encourage genuine dialogue as it simply fails to take the theological, social and political significance of otherness seriously. Second, defining religious traditions as different human (cognitive or experiential) responses to the Real amounts to saying that religions are no more than human constructions whose respective particularities in belief, doctrine and practice are manmade and not willed by the Divine (Shah-Kazemi, 2006, 245-251). To solve this problem, American Shi'a Muslim Legenhausen proposes a non-reductive version of pluralism, rooted in Islamic theology, which (so he claims) 'allow[s] for ultimately irreconcilable differences' while providing, simultaneously, 'motivation for tolerance' (Legenhausen, 2006, 115). This is achieved by pointing to the principle shared by both Shi'a Islam and Catholic Christianity that no one can place any limit on the extent of the grace of God (Legenhausen, 2006, 115). The reason why I have chosen to focus on this particular theory of interreligious relations is that there seems to be some confusion within

[2] See MacGrane (1989), Tracy (1994), Byrne (1995) and Sacks (2003).

academic circles about the extent to which this view is really distinct from inclusivist interpretations of religion. Thus, Barnes notes in his chapter on pluralism in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (2010):

> 'Non-reductive pluralism, as he [Legenhausen] calls it, comes close to what Christians have recently retrieved from an earlier tradition: that it is possible for a person to be saved by the grace of God even though what either tradition would uphold as the strict obligations of faith and practice are not fulfilled' (Barnes in Hinnells, 2010, 436-437).

However, without having elaborated any further on this apparent link between Legenhausen's position and inclusivism, and without having proposed an alternative non-reductive theory himself, Barnes concludes his chapter with the following lines:

> 'The pluralist move […] does little more than impose an artificial unity on an area of human endeavor and interaction which steadfastly resists such reduction […] A dialogical non-reductive pluralism, which takes the truths and values of different faith communities with the utmost seriousness […] may offer a better way forward' (Barnes in Hinnells, 2010, 438).

Given the importance of finding constructive ways of engaging with people from other religions in this increasingly pluralistic world, it is my aim to clarify whether this 'way forward', apparently provided by non-reductive pluralism, can really be viewed as a sign of progress or rather, as I shall object, as an old route with a new name, leading back into inclusivist claims of spiritual superiority.

1.3. Reflexivity

With a research topic as emotionally subjective as interreligious relations, I think it necessary to say a few words about my own spiritual background. The greatest identifiable influence on my academic perspective on interfaith issues is my Quaker belief in "That of God in everyone" – a notion deriving from George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, whose potential implications for Christian-Muslim dialogue will be

considered in Chapter 5. A common interpretation of this statement, which I agree upon, is that ‘there is literally a bit of God dwelling inside of every human being’, regardless of which particular spiritual path, if any, the latter may follow (aboutquakers.org). Like Hick, I would therefore entertain the idea that all religions are equally valid paths to the same ultimate Reality, expected to enter into dialogue as equal partners. At the same time, however, I am convinced that this metaphysical theory – religious pluralism – is *not* a good basis for interfaith dialogue *per se* because it ignores what is of utmost importance to those actually participating in interreligious exchanges: the particular beliefs, including truth claims, and practices of the respective traditions. Therefore, although sympathetic to it myself, I do not see religious pluralism as a universally applicable theory to be made normative in dialogue situations.

To approach the topic of interfaith dialogue as objectively as possible, I have therefore chosen to analyze both the problem of difference involved in pluralism and Legenhausen’s potential solution to it from a philosophical/phenomenological perspective. This entails two main methodological decisions: First, by means of what is commonly known as “phenomenological antireductionism”, I am seeking to free my own viewpoint from uncritical preconceptions concealing the uniqueness of religious phenomena such as the experiential significance of adhering to exclusivist truth claims. Second, it is my aim to adopt a phenomenological *epoqué* in that I bracket, as far as possible, my own Quaker beliefs about the universality of religious belief and the ethical value of pluralist interpretations of religion. The chosen focus on the significance of difference may hence be seen as a first step to achieve this goal.

1.4. Overall research aim and individual research objectives

The overall aim of this research is to advance understanding of the role and significance of issues of difference (differences in belief, doctrine or practice; different senses of religious or cultural identity) within interfaith relations and Christian-Muslim relations specifically. Given the philosophical potential of this research topic, I have chosen to concentrate, primarily, on the theoretical framework, from which ideas of universality and particularity emerge – contemporary theories of religious pluralism, with a particular focus on Legenhausen's non-reductive position. This has led me to the following two main research questions: Is Legenhausen's non-reductive religious pluralism an acceptable corrective to Hick's pluralism (in that it embraces the significance of difference within interreligious relations)? And if so: does this make it a recommendable theoretical basis for Muslim-Christian[3] dialogue (e.g. in Western contexts) today? To answer these questions, a number of individual research objectives – like premises in a complex argument – will guide us through the discussion. These objectives are:

- to *summarize* and *examine* pluralist positions, both as approaches to interfaith dialogue and as concepts of religion, concentrating particularly on Hick's pluralist hypothesis and its implications for the study of religions.
- to *identify* and *evaluate critically* objections against such pluralist positions, especially the problem of difference involved in Hick's pluralism.

[3] NB: The terms "Christian-Muslim" and "Muslim-Christian" dialogue are used synonymously in this thesis, with the sole difference that, whenever the theory under consideration is written from an identifiable religious perspective (Shi'a Islam in Legenhausen's case), I have chosen to put that particular tradition in the first position. However, it is my conviction that interfaith dialogue always involves a two-way relationship in which both members are, or should be, equal partners. Therefore, naming Islam or Christianity first, in these instances, does not hint at any personal preference.

- to *introduce* Legenhausen's non-reductive pluralism as a possible solution to this problem and hence, a potential corrective to Hick's position.
- to *examine* the extent to which this Islamic version of pluralism differs from Christian inclusivism and its tendency towards claims of spiritual superiority.
- to *formulate* recommendations on interfaith issues such as the promotion of a specific model for interfaith dialogue, sensitive to issues of difference.

At the risk of oversimplification of the purpose and value of each of these steps, it may be worth noting that objectives 1 - 3 focus primarily on reasons and emerging issues, whereas it is in steps 4 and 5 that this research will make contributions to the field of interfaith dialogue. It is important to realize, though, that these individual objectives are not separate unrelated tasks, but should be seen as research activities that are necessarily interlinked. Thus, the first three objectives enhance understanding of the significance of issues of universality and particularity within interreligious relations (and the tension that exists between them) thereby building a basis for later conclusions and recommendations made with regard to contemporary dialogue situations.

This research project hopes to contribute to the development of the field of interfaith dialogue in a number of ways: Firstly, by providing a critical review of issues pertinent to dialogue situations between Christians and Muslims, including questions such as: How can the need for recognition of both similarities and differences be balanced effectively? What theoretical bases to do so are there? Secondly, by critically examining precisely those models that are commonly understood as means to further constructive dialogue (interpreted as a voluntary practice aimed at conciliation and the furthering of mutual trust and understanding). And thirdly, by formulating

recommendations on how Christian-Muslim dialogue, intent on recognizing the significance of difference within interreligious relations, may be conducted successfully, especially with regard to the pressing issues of globalization and plurality in this postmodern age.

1.5. Outline structure

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter provides important background information on the history of constructive dialogue between Christians and Muslims and contemporary theories of engaging with people from other faiths in increasingly globalized contexts. The focus of this research is discussed and justified and the overall research aim and individual research objectives are identified.

Chapter 2: Issues and review of related literature

This chapter examines literature essential to understanding the relation between religious diversity and contemporary theories of interfaith dialogue. Thus, it provides detailed information on the impact of religious pluralism on interfaith issues, concentrating particularly on Hick's hypothesis as well as on common objections raised to it by contemporary scholars of philosophy and religion. The problem of difference as the main focus of this thesis is introduced and a first consideration of Legenhausen's solution is included.

Chapter 3: Religious pluralism and the problem of difference within interreligious relations

This chapter elaborates further on the problem of difference as a crucial criticism against religious pluralism. Specifically, the views of Van der Ven, Masuzawa and

Sacks are considered as influential representatives of this line of argumentation, leading us to the question of whether other perspectives on interreligious relations, unwilling to reduce differences to the lowest common denominator, might be better theoretical bases for interfaith dialogue.

Chapter 4: Legenhausen's non-reductive corrective to Hick's pluralist hypothesis: A sound solution to the problem of difference?

This chapter investigates the extent to which Legenhausen's non-reductive pluralism is a successful solution to the problem of difference. Here, a particular focus is on the question of whether this form of pluralism is really distinct from inclusivist interpretations of religions and their inherent tendency towards claims of spiritual superiority.

Chapter 5: Alternative approaches to Muslim-Christian dialogue: Towards a (religiously non-specific) model of witnessing

This chapter considers two alternative, religiously specific, views on interreligious relations found in Sufi universalism and Quakerism (and their interpretations of the principles of *tawhid* and "That of God in everyone" respectively). The aim is to clarify whether such spiritual insights may serve as conceptual frameworks for constructive interfaith dialogue today. The chapter closes with a brief sketch of another, *religiously non-specific*, model for interfaith dialogue, based on the idea of witnessing, promoted here as a partial solution to the problem of difference.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter revisits the overall aim and specific objectives of this research project. The findings are summarized and related to the individual research objectives.

Conclusions from this research work are derived and linked to the individual objectives; and based on these conclusions, recommendations on interfaith issues (in particular, dialogue situations between Christians and Muslims) are made.

Chapter 7: References

This chapter contains an alphabetical listing of the sources referred to in this work. The APA (American Psychological Association) system of referencing is used.

Chapter 2

Issues and review of related literature

2.1. Introduction

This literature review will examine the main issues surrounding the emergence of religious pluralism – in particular Hick's pluralist hypothesis – as a theory of interreligious relations; objections commonly raised against Hick by contemporary scholars of philosophy and religion; the problem of difference involved in Hick's pluralism; as well as issues essential to dialogue situations (here: between Christians and Muslims) that emerge from these considerations. The study within this review of literature focuses on objectives 1, 2 and 3 as set out in subsection 1.4. of the introductory chapter (the fourth objective will be met through the vehicle of critical analysis of Legenhausen's position in chapter 4; while the final objective will be derived in chapter 5 as a result of the findings from objectives 1 - 4).

By exploring these areas of literature, a significant contribution will be made to this research. The relationship between religious diversity (e.g. in Western plural societies) and pluralist interpretations of religion, especially when understood as theoretical frameworks for interfaith dialogue, will be evaluated. Additionally, serious problems involved in pluralist concepts of religion, such as the apparent need to reduce, for the sake of unity, important differences in belief, doctrine and practice to the lowest common denominator, will be assessed. Then, Legenhausen's argument for an Islamic non-reductive pluralism will be introduced as a potential solution to the problem of difference; and emerging questions such as the relation of this form of pluralism to inclusivist approaches to Christian-Muslim dialogue will be considered,

thus preparing the way for the closer examination of these topics in chapter 4. The value of studying the aforementioned literature areas is to provide, in a structured way, meaningful discussion of the role and significance of issues of difference in contemporary interreligious dialogue situations. Thus, it is hoped that, at the end of this chapter, a critical understanding of key issues is exhibited and that there will emerge a clear focus for further research in the field of non-reductive pluralism. In the first instance, a sensible starting point is to investigate how religious pluralism is defined and what versions may be identified.

2.2. Identifying types of religious pluralism

The meaning of the term "religious pluralism" is complex. When employed in a purely descriptive sense, for example, it is sometimes used synonymously with the idea of religious diversity or plurality. In this case, Barnes claims, it refers to what is perceived as '`religiously other´ within a given social context' (Barnes in Hinnells, 2010, 426). Ever since the 1980s, however, the term has developed an additional connotation. More often than not, Barnes explains, the term is now used normatively 'to refer to a specific stance in philosophy and theology, associated with the name of John Hick and the thinkers of what might be called the `Myth of Christian Uniqueness´ school (a project developed in Hick and Knitter 1987 with an important set of counter-proposals in D'Costa 1990a[4])' (Barnes in Hinnells, 2010, 426). This theory, put in its simplest form, 'states that all religions are equally valid paths to the same transcendent reality' (Barnes in Hinnells, 2010, 426). Instead of merely describing a certain state of affairs – e.g. the fact that a given population consists of various ethnic groups – this sense of pluralism therefore *prescribes* (rather than describes) how issues of diversity are to be approached from a particular viewpoint,

[4] This source is found in the bibliography as D'Costa (1990).

here: Western liberalism. To avoid unnecessary confusion, however, I shall distinguish strictly between these two meanings, using the expression “plurality” or “diversity” when employing the term in its descriptive sense and “pluralism” only when referring to the particular philosophical concept under consideration here.

Furthermore, there are different types of pluralism and different ways of distinguishing between them. D’Costa identifies *unitary pluralism* (exemplified most notably by Hick), *ethical pluralism* (Knitter, Pieris, Radford Ruether) and *pluriform pluralism* (Panikkar, Heim and Placher) as the three main existing forms of pluralism (D’Costa, 2009). The aim of unitary pluralism, according to this categorization, is to articulate an essential unity between the world religions by showing that they all share common beliefs (e.g. about the purpose of life), even if they are expressed, experienced and practiced in different ways (D’Costa, 2009, 5). Ethical pluralism, in contrast, is more pragmatic in that it sees religions primarily as bearers of certain ethical codes aimed at the realization of practical human goals such as social justice or environmental protection[5] (D’Costa, 2009, 6). And finally, proponents of pluriform pluralisms do not see truth – in the context of religion – as unitary, but pluriform in the sense that all religious traditions, albeit unable to ever possess the whole truth, have some of it, thus being capable of transforming the others, e.g. by speaking to them on their own terms (D’Costa, 2009, 14). Regarding the third category, Morris objects, however, that it is inappropriate to group together such diverse approaches to theological thinking about other religions because Heim and Placher clearly depart from the classical pluralisms of Hick and Panikkar and should hence be discussed separately (Morris, 2013, 87). Panikkar’s pluralism, Morris claims, is still rather close

[5] Other ethical pluralists, not mentioned by D’Costa, are Küng and Ruland; see for example Küng (1993) and Ruland (2002).

to Hick's unitary pluralism in that it depends on the 'underlying notion that there is a unity to truth', towards which individual religions, possessing only a part, may be seen to be working incessantly (Morris, 2013, 98). With special regard to soteriological questions, Heim therefore criticizes that classical pluralists including Panikkar cannot affirm a plurality of different approaches to salvation, homogenizing instead various religious beliefs and practices into a unified whole (Heim, 1995, 129-131). Heim and Placher, in contrast, redefine pluralistic notions of salvation insofar as they do not see them as 'partial perspectives on a single truth', but 'as a way of speaking about multiple realities, multiple truths and multiple ends' that need not be reduced to a common core (Morris, 2013, 99).

Another way of distinguishing between pluralist theories is therefore to identify *reductive* and *non-reductive* versions (Legenhausen, 2006, 2009; Barnes in Hinnells, 2010). Here, the purpose of categorization is to distinguish between pluralist views that reduce differences to some common denominator for the sake of creating a unity among different religions (Hick, Knitter, Panikkar) and those that attempt to recognize the significance of difference within interfaith relations. Scholars who have objected to the reductiveness of classical pluralisms, thereby implicitly calling for a non-reductive approach, are MacIntyre (1985), MacGrane (1989), Tracy (1994), Byrne (1995), and Sacks (2003). Given that most of these arguments are written in response to Hick's pluralist hypothesis, it is this type of pluralism which will be considered more closely in the next section.

2.3. Hick's pluralism and its implications for interfaith dialogue

In *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989), Hick proposes the metaphysical theory that there is a divine Reality above and beyond human comprehension, which is both

personal (as Western theism has it) and impersonal (as Eastern religions claim) (Hick, 1989, 252-255, 278-279). This reality makes itself known in different ways to all human beings according the latters' particular cultural and historical modes of reception (Hick, 1989, 48). As different responses to the ineffable Real (ineffable because the Real is finally beyond all description) religions can thus be seen as alternative soteriological spaces founded – despite their differences in belief and practice – on a common core: the goal of guiding people to Reality-centredness. It is then reasonable to claim that all religions are true to some extent and false in other ways. D'Costa summarizes this idea as follows:

> '[According to Hick,] religions are true in so much as they align believers correctly towards the Real producing an attitude of loving compassion towards one's neighbour and social and natural environment thereby breaking down the egocentricism of the believer's life […] They are false in so much as they claim ultimacy and finality regarding their conceptions of God […] and in the way they sometimes give ontological uniqueness […] to the way in which this truth is mediated.' (D'Costa, 1996, 227)

Assuming partial truth in all religions, this pluralism could therefore be identified as a form of *ontological* pluralism (Akbari, 2009). Akbari argues that for ontological pluralists like Hick 'the truth of all religions is a factual one'; whereas *epistemic* pluralists would support the somewhat weaker claim 'that no religion is able to prove its own validity for other religions, and since we have no reason, we *assume* that all religions are true and authentic' (Akbari, 2009, 103, my emphasis). Whether they are factually true and authentic, however, remains unanswerable from this perspective. Hick, by contrast, due to his ontological view, is able to support the thesis that all religions are authentic ways for man to relate to the same ineffable Real.

Two argumentative devices are employed to establish this position. The first is the Kantian type distinction between the *noumenal* and the *phenomenal*. According to

Kant, the *noumenon* is a posited object that is known (if at all) without the use of sense perception; whereas the *phenomenon* refers to anything that appears to, or is an intentional object of, the senses (Kant, 2005). Regarding the Real, Hick translates this as follows: There are two ways of speaking about the Real – first, as the Real *an sich* (in itself) which is beyond all description and hence, ineffable; and second, as the differing images of the Real within the religions which are but different phenomenal representations of the noumenal, in short: the real as humanly thought or experienced (Hick, 1989, 232-240). This enables Hick to claim that the Real is beyond everything, but related to human conceptions of the Transcendent such as God or Allah. The second device, employed by Hick to establish an egalitarian view of religions, is the distinction between *mythic* and *factual* truth. Here, it is argued that exclusivist truth claims such the Christian belief that God is disclosed in Jesus uniquely are not factually, but rather mythically true, and are therefore better understood as the believer's personal way of relating to the figure of Christ than any metaphysical truth claim (Hick, 1989, 343-346; 353-355).

This has important implications for interfaith dialogue: Relativizing religious claims to finality and truth in this way, Hick is able to shift the focus from potential conflicts in interreligious encounters to that which he sees as common to all religions: human striving for Reality-centredness, which opens the way to 'loving compassion towards one's neighbour' (D'Costa, 1996, 227). On this basis, it is possible to hold that all religions, like members of one family, are equal partners in dialogue and collaboration (Hick, 1973 [1996], 146; 1989, 3-5). Therefore, for constructive interfaith dialogue to take place, one might conclude, participants in dialogue must simply concentrate on that which unites rather than separates them in their diversity, by

ignoring the particularities of their religious beliefs and focusing on potential commonalities instead.

2.4. Common objections against Hick's pluralist hypothesis

Criticism of this view of interreligious relations comes from various academic fields. Philosophers of religion, assessing the extent to which pluralism can really be made normative, argue for example that it is implausible to make different expressions of the Absolute, let alone complete religious languages, equivalent (Cottingham, 2005; D'Costa, 1996; Loughlin, 1990, Rowe, 1999; Ward, 1990). To show that one cannot make two unknown variables (such as different concepts of the Absolute) identical, Ward claims: 'it is rather like saying, "I do not know what X is; and I do not know what Y is; therefore X must be the same as Y"' (Ward, 1990, 5). Others are concerned with ethical questions about the exercise of power that arise from pluralist worldviews. Asad, for example, rejects the underlying assumption of Western religious pluralism that there is nothing wrong about the pluralist's desire 'to mould others in one's own image' (Asad, 1993, 12). Furthermore, it is questioned whether the concept behind pluralism, postulating religions as identifiable entities, is at all valid. Lash drawing on the historical analyses of Harrison (1990) and Cantwell Smith (1978) objects that the models used by Western pluralists to describe non-Christian religions have their origin in the rationalist deism of Western Enlightenment and are therefore hardly applicable to other traditions (Lash, 1996). Similarly, Milbank argues that pluralism lacks a critical sense of itself as it ignores the possibility that its underlying ethical values are a 'product of Anglo-American empiricist rationality', which are simply imposed onto other cultures (Milbank, 1990, 175). And Masuzawa even goes as far as to claim that the whole discourse of world religions, especially in the phenomenology of religion with its constant focus on the irreducible uniqueness of

individual religious experience, is a hidden means to preserve European/Christian universalism, including traditional claims of intellectual superiority (Masuzawa, 2005). From this perspective, the pluralist's concern to provide an egalitarian account of religion by focusing on commonalities between religions results, whether intentionally or not, in ongoing suppression of that which is perceived as religiously different from Western Christianity.

2.5. The problem of difference

This leads us to the main focus of this thesis: the problem of difference within interreligious relations. One of the first scholars who criticized the reductiveness of unitary theories of pluralism was MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (1985). The most serious problem involved in pluralism, as he sees it, is that this theory (although having transformed the Christian salvation problematic from the question of *if* people from other faiths can be saved to reflections on *how* they might be, e.g. *despite* or *through* their non-Christian beliefs) still focuses too much on the salvation of the other while ignoring completely the theological significance of otherness[6] (MacIntyre, 1985, 205). Thus, one might claim that Hick's pluralism, by creating an artificial unity among religions that consciously ignores differences in belief and practice, cannot encourage genuine dialogue as it fails to take otherness seriously in the first place. Similarly, MacGrane argues that religious pluralism opens the door to cultural relativism thereby trivializing encounters with people from other faith communities, which – much in contrast to its self-proclaimed aim – inevitably reaffirms 'the Eurocentric idea of the progress of knowledge' (MacGrane, 1989, 129).

[6] Similar points regarding the theological significance of otherness are made by Tracy (1994) and Dupuis (1997).

To avoid the dangers of Eurocentricism, especially in the 21st century post- 9/11, (without doubt, an explosive ingredient in the potential 'clash of civilizations' predicted by Huntington), Sacks therefore calls on the religious leaders of the three great monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, to help create a new 'religious paradigm' that 'values our shared humanity as the image of God […] But also values our differences' (Sacks, 2003; Sacks, 2009, 41). According to Sacks, this new religious idea – the recognition of 'the dignity of difference' – is a promising alternative to both universalism and tribalism, which he sees as the two main existing human responses to the challenge of difference leading inevitably, however, to conflict between cultures and religions:

> 'Today we are inclined to see resurgent tribalism as the great danger of our fragmenting world. It is, but it is not the only danger. The paradox is that the very thing we take to be the antithesis of tribalism – universalism – can also be deeply threatening […] A global culture is a universal culture, and universal cultures, though they have brought about great good, have also done immense harm. They see as the basis of our humanity the fact that we are ultimately the same […] But if our commonalities are all that ultimately matter, then our differences are distractions to be overcome [by violence, if necessary]' (Sacks. 2003, 47):

Acknowledging the dignity of difference, by contrast, may open our hearts and minds to the enriching insights of other religions, which are revealed in both their universal messages and in the particular, thereby teaching us to respect other traditions for what they really are - 'just as loving parents love all their children not for what makes them the same but for what makes each of them unique' (Sacks, 2009, 41). Hence, it is arguable that reductive pluralism with its focus on universal spiritual values or human goals is, *by its very nature*, a hindrance rather than a help in furthering genuine understanding between different faiths.

As Legenhausen suggests, however, the fate of pluralism as a theoretical basis for constructive interfaith dialogue is not necessarily sealed. To solve the problem of difference, he claims, it is possible to propose a non-reductive version of it, capable of recognizing the dignity of difference called for by Sacks. In 'A Muslim's Proposal: Non-Reductive Religious Pluralism' (2006), Legenhausen introduces the following classification: While reductive pluralists 'attempt to identify a common element among different religions on the basis of which the religions are successful in some specified way', non-reductive pluralists would claim that 'God guides whomever He will, not only by virtue of features common to several religions, but by their unique divine qualities, as well' (Legenhausen, 2006, 4[7]). This 'ideal approach' to interfaith relations, inherent in Islamic theology, Legenhausen argues, 'recognize[s] and allow[s] for ultimately irreconcilable differences in practice as well as theory, while at the same time providing motivation for tolerance', especially between Muslims and Christians (Legenhausen, 2006, 64). This is achieved by pointing to the principle of the general limitlessness of God's grace, shared by both Shi'a Islam and Catholic Christianity. Thus, it is argued that, according to an Islamic non-reductive pluralism, 'correct faith is *required* but *not necessary* for salvation: It is *required* in the sense that it is made obligatory by the command of God' – here: the believer's recognition of Islam as the "Seal of Prophethood" – but *not necessary* 'in the sense that it is possible for a person to be saved by the grace of God even though this obligation is not fulfilled' (Legenhausen, no date [a]). From this position, religious differences are no longer culturally conditioned human constructions (as Hick's pluralism implies); instead, religious diversity may be seen as divinely ordained and hence, valuable in its own right. It is on the basis of this theory, Legenhausen proclaims, that a

[7] The numbers used in reference to Legenhausen (2006) are paragraph numbers inserted by Legenhausen in this online article in lieu of page numbers.

permanent solution to the problem of difference within interfaith relations can be found.

2.6. Emerging issues and the need for further research

As indicated in chapter 1, however, it is as yet unclear whether this particular proposal of a non-reductive version of religious pluralism can really be seen as a new theoretical framework for interfaith dialogue, and hence as an improvement of earlier approaches such as exclusivism, inclusivism and reductive pluralisms. As we have seen, Barnes identifies a possible link between Legenhausen's position and Christian inclusivism, for example. Yet, the problem with this, as Legenhausen himself emphasizes, is that inclusivism maintains, to some extent at least, exclusivist claims of spiritual superiority, simply because the religion at hand – here Christianity – 'is taken to have an advantage over others with regard to the truth of its creed' or the effectiveness of its salvific powers (Legenhausen, 2006, 37). Yet, upholding the preeminence of Islam as the Seal of the Prophets (that is the only legitimate religion ordained by Allah for this era) is tantamount to saying that those who are following religions other than Islam today are practically 'making a mistake', albeit one which may be permissible if God wills (Legenhausen, 2006, 111). Using this version of pluralism as a theoretical basis for Muslim-Christian dialogue, it is evident then, would not lead to a truly egalitarian view of religions and their adherents, but rather to an attitude towards people of other faiths at constant risk of slipping back into the arrogance of inclusivist thinking. One might therefore conclude that even if this theory solved the problem of difference successfully – a point not yet proved – it would certainly do so at a great cost: Differences in belief and practice between Muslims and Christians, although recognized and allowed for from this position, are ultimately explained by reference to the false choices Christians have made vis à vis their

religion. Evaluating Legenhausen's non-reductive pluralism as an approach capable of 'tak[ing] the truths and values of different faith communities with the utmost seriousness', as Barnes's analysis suggests, would then be quite inaccurate (Barnes in Hinnells, 2010, 438).

To summarize: This literature review revealed that issues of difference within interreligious relations are of utmost importance when trying to provide a theoretical framework for constructive interfaith dialogue today. Replying to the weaknesses identified in Hick's pluralist hypothesis, numerous scholars have stressed the need for a theory of interreligious relations that is able to tolerate differences in belief and practice, but also religious and cultural identity, within dialogue situations (MacIntyre, MacGrane, Sacks). Legenhausen's non-reductive pluralism presents itself as the perfect solution to the problem of difference and is even promoted, albeit implicitly, in the *Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (2010) as a promising 'way forward' for proponents of egalitarian concepts of interreligious relations (Barnes in Hinnells, 2010, 438). As the initial textual analysis has shown, however, it is hard to tell whether this position really departs from inclusivist interpretations of religion, upholding claims of spiritual superiority on the part of one religion. This raises the question of whether the significance of difference within interfaith relations is truly appreciated by it. To arrive at a deeper understanding of these issues, it is necessary to investigate both the problem of difference involved in reductive pluralism and Legenhausen's non-reductive corrective to it more closely. The next chapter will start with the former task.

Chapter 3

Religious pluralism and the problem of difference within interreligious relations

3.1. Hick's pluralism: A unifying or divisive force in interreligious relations?

Before considering why recognizing differences is so important in the context of interfaith dialogue today, we need to investigate more thoroughly the connection between Hick's unitary pluralism and issues of similarity and difference within interreligious relations. For this purpose, it is helpful to consider more closely the Kantian distinction between the *noumenon* and the *phenomenon* employed by Hick as a means to establish his egalitarian view of religions. Here follows a short summary of what was argued in chapter 2: Like Kant, who distinguishes between reality as it is in itself (the *noumenon*) and reality as perceived by a subject (the *phenomenon*), Hick differentiates between the Real *an sich* (Ultimate Reality) and the Real as variously understood by different religions (Hick, 1989, 236-240). He does so to argue for the pluralist hypothesis that all religions in the world, while certainly being the product of collective human attempts to know the *noumenon*, only manage to construct partially adequate understandings of the Real *an sich* in their own cultural terms (Hick, 1989, 236-240). In other words, even though the Real in itself is presupposed in religious experience according to Hick, what people actually experience when engaging in their particular religious practices, for example, is only one form or another of the phenomenal Real – the Real as humanly thought or experienced. As we have seen, employing this argumentative device enables Hick to claim that all religions, despite their differences in belief and practice, are equally valid and authentic human responses to the one ineffable Real. Thus, Hick shifts the

focus from potential conflicts in interreligious encounters, originating for instance from adherence to exclusivist truth claims, to that which unites different religions in their diversity.

As chapter 2 revealed, however, this unifying tendency inherent in Hick's focus on a common spiritual core can also be seen as a divisive force as it ignores not only the social and political, but also the theological significance of difference within interreligious relations. To look deeper into the subject matter now, let us examine the reason why this is the case. Hick's ignoring of issues of difference, it is arguable, is a direct consequence of a key premise involved in his argument: the idea of 'the religious ambiguity of the universe' (Hick, 1989, 75-78): Needing to explain how people of intelligence may justifiably subscribe to different religious ideologies – without having to give up the presupposition of the general rationality of religious belief[8] – Hick is obliged to draw the somewhat counter-intuitive conclusion that the universe is 'religiously ambiguous' (Hick, 1989, 77, 210). As Dastmalchian objects, however, this theory is itself quite ambiguous as it fails to specify which type of religious ambiguity (temporary or permanent) is implied in it (Dastmalchian, 2009, 81). Here are Dastmalchian's definitions of these two types:

> 'The experiencable universe is temporarily religiously ambiguous if, at a given time, and despite the best of human efforts, one religious ideology cannot be distinguished from others on truth-conducive grounds, without there being reason to suggest that this stalemate must necessarily be the case for all time […] The experiencable universe is permanently religiously ambiguous if it is inescapably the case in this life that one religious ideology can never be distinguished from all other religious ideologies on truth-conducive evidential grounds (Dastmalchian, 2009, 81-82).

[8] The theory of the rationality of belief is established by Hick by arguing that the mere fact that people have religious experiences provides them with a justification for adopting religious beliefs (Hick, 1989, 210).

Yet, to establish a truly egalitarian view of religions, Dastmalchian concludes, it does not make sense for Hick to refer to temporary religious ambiguity here because 'if the experiencable universe is [only] temporarily religiously ambiguous, a religious epistemic exclusivist would still have confidence in the truth of his own religious beliefs', in which case other religions might be approached with suspicion or even hostility (Dastmalchian, 2009, 87). What Hick must therefore have in mind is that the universe we experience is permanently religiously ambiguous. Exclusivist approaches to interreligious relations would then be (by their very nature) unreasonable, simply because exclusivists could no longer expect their own religious beliefs to be ever shown to be true.

Unfortunately, the same line of argument leads into serious problems concealing the role and significance of issues of difference within interfaith relations. If the universe as we know it is permanently religiously ambiguous, the only absolute in religious matters that remains for now and forever is the Real *an sich.* The Real, however, can never be known completely by any individual or religious tradition because it is ultimately beyond human (phenomenal) comprehension. Consequently, only the *noumenal* Real holds absoluteness, while all other religious truths and practices are only *relative* to the respective religious traditions and to people's experiences within those traditions (Stenger, 2011, 171). Hick's pluralism, it is evident then, faces the challenge of cultural and religious relativity.

3.2. Hick's pluralist hypothesis and the charge of cultural and religious and relativism

Van der Ven summarizes the charge of relativism from an *emic* Christian perspective: According to the pluralist hypothesis, 'Christianity and the other religions are all just

vehicles of knowledge about […] God, contextually confined as they are both temporally and spatially' (Van der Ven, 2006, 431). The cultural relativism involved in this view therefore leads, inevitably, 'to religious relativism, which is incompatible with Christianity's claim, not merely to universality but also to uniqueness and absoluteness' (Van der Ven, 2006, 431). As the Vatican document *Dominus Jesus* (2000) specifies, he argues, Christianity has, from an orthodox viewpoint, not only 'a universal message for all peoples in all ages; that message also contains the unique truth […] and this truth is also absolute, not to be experienced by any other religion' (Van der Ven, 2006, 431). This reveals that Hick's pluralism, relativizing claims to religious truth and uniqueness by placing them in the phenomenal realm alone, cannot fully appreciate the significance of insiders' perspectives on their own as well as other religions. Van der Ven therefore suggests that Race's tripartite model of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism is a misleading method of categorization. While both exclusivist and inclusivist models approach issues of interfaith relations from an *emic* (mostly, Christian) 'participant perspective', on the basis of which participants in dialogue may 'identify with their own tradition and approach other religions from that same perspective'; pluralism attempts to look at religions from an exclusive 'observer perspective' (Van der Ven, 2006, 431). Thus, it tries to examine all religions (including the one that the examiner may identify with) from an outsider perspective, describing as objectively as possible how individuals or groups interpret the *noumenal* Real without paying too much attention to the insiders' phenomenal realm of experience. It is this realm of experience, however, which ultimately reveals the importance of differences in belief, doctrine and practice felt by participants in dialogue when faced with other worldviews. A model for interfaith relations that does not take seriously such insider perspectives in the first place, one might therefore conclude, is not a satisfactory basis for interfaith dialogue.

This suggests that Hick's pluralism, although designed as an appeal for tolerance, actually misses the point. As Springsted argues 'the real problem of interreligious dialogue is not, as Hick sees it, in removing those beliefs and values that appear to hinder dialogue because of their uniqueness, but in engaging in dialogue *given those beliefs and values*' (Springsted, 1992, 25-26). Drawing on Weil's *The Need for Roots* (1971), Springsted therefore claims that a truly constructive approach always needs to 'consider the broader cultural and historical context of the person entering into dialogue, including his values' and religious convictions (Springsted, 1992, 34). The Christian doctrine of incarnation, for example, – albeit certainly a delicate issue in Muslim-Christian relations – does then not have to be viewed as 'a narrow doctrinal and intellectual claim to exclusivity' anymore but rather in terms of 'its function in forming the character of the person who holds it' (Springsted, 1992, 34). It is this individual character, rooted in particular values and convictions, Weil argues, that ultimately determines the fate of any dialogue situation.

Yet, one might object to the charge of relativism, as Stenger does, that Hick is by no means a pure relativist of religions. Even though 'for Hick the Real in itself grounds religious experiences of varying kinds', she claims, there can be 'only one ultimate, not a plurality of ultimates' (Stenger, 2011, 170). This one Real in itself, she therefore insists, is the one absolute in Hick's hypothesis, which effectively 'prevent[s] a pure relativism' (Stenger, 2011, 170). This objection, however, is not convincing because the only contribution it makes to the debate on cultural relativity is that it keeps Hick from being a pure relativist about the *nature of Transcendence*; the charges of cultural and religious relativism in the context of *practical religious differences*,

however, are not refuted by it. The cultural relativity resulting from Hick's theory can therefore be seen as an unsolved problem in the pluralist agenda.

3.3. Ethical pluralisms and the charge of moral universalism

Relativism, however, is not the only problem involved in pluralist theories that might lead to ignoring issues of difference within interreligious relations. Ethical pluralists such as Knitter, Küng or Ruland, for example, could be accused of moral universalism. Let us consider Ruland as the most recent example. In *Conscience Across Borders* (2002), Ruland promotes his vision of a 'global God-centered ethics' based on Küng's 'Global Ethics' written in 1993 for the Second Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago (Ruland, 2002). Both works explore what could be called "the ways of religious wisdom", bringing the resources of interfaith dialogue to bear on such varied issues as human rights, global responsibility, social justice and environmental protection. Thus, with regard to the dangers of ecological degradation in a globalized world, for example, Ruland appeals for a religiously comparative, 'God-centered ecology', a concept of interreligious collaboration which rests on the premise that the God invoked in the recesses of human conscience is not the exclusive property of Christians because other religions bear witness to similar moral ideals (here: to preserve God's creation) (Ruland, 2002, 69-70). This global 'ethics of virtue, character and story', rooted in both the narratives and universal spiritual insights of the world religions, Ruland proclaims, has the potential of complementing the 'minimal ethics of international law' such as the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in at least two important ways: First, at a theoretical level, it is able to 'internalize [secular] human rights ideals' on spiritual grounds; and second, at

a practical level, it invites religious leaders and laypeople from different religions to work together for the realization of shared human goals[9] (Ruland, 2002, 145).

Yet, the problem with this view is that it ignores potential cultural differences in moral experience by universalizing, unconsciously, the moral standards of Western liberalism. The human rights debate illustrates this: Generally speaking, the concept of human rights – clearly the basis for Knitter's, Küng's and Ruland's global ethics projects – involves the fundamental belief that all human beings, regardless of race, sex, class or religion, possess a certain range of inalienable rights to which they are inherently entitled for the mere reason of being human. Modern human rights conceptions in particular, however, might be seen as culture-specific in that they go back to the foundation of the UN in the aftermath of WWII. One of the UN's main objectives is to 'achieve international cooperation […] in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights' (The United Nations). The UDHR, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948, can then be viewed as a conceptual basis for the realization of this goal. In its preamble, this document appeals for the universal recognition of human dignity as the 'foundation of freedom, peace and justice in the world' (UDHR). The main body determines different types of rights and freedoms: rights of the individual in civil society; spiritual, public and political freedoms; and social, economic and cultural rights. To stress the absolute universality of these rights, the General Assembly calls them a 'common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations' (UDHR).

[9] Another ethical pluralist vision of global responsibility, based on the common human experience of suffering, can be found in Knitter (1995), (1996) and (1998). Similar views are expressed by Gyger in D'Arcy May (1998).

However, this claim of universality is contested. Associated with the Western system of democracy, human rights are sometimes perceived by outsiders of the tradition as culture-specific inventions imposed onto other cultures in a paternalistic way. Especially in Muslim majority societies, the validity of the concept is disputed[10]. It should be noted, though, that various factors complicate the relationship between human rights and Islam. These are the history of conflict between Europe and the Middle East from the crusades to colonialism, the continuing global power of the West, especially in the form of American capitalism; and the existence of *sharia* law as an alternative to Western law models (Herbert, 2001, 66-68). It is also worth noting that *sharia* and human rights laws differ in one fundamental aspect: Whereas *sharia* emphasizes a collective obedience to divine law, human rights laws stress individual freedom, which (from an *etic* perspective) could be interpreted as a sign for the loss of solidarity in Western societies, brought about by the dehumanizing effects of Western capitalism. From this viewpoint, there seems to be a clash of moral values between Western human rights protecting individual freedom of thought, for example, and *sharia* which 'in its official interpretation based on ta'a [obedience] condemns it' (Mernissi in Herbert, 2001, 70). Global ethics projects such as those undertaken by Knitter, Küng and Ruland, clearly rooted in the ideals of Western liberalism, might then be accused of a moral universalism which ignores the possibility that ethical values might be relative to the culture from which they derive.

This view – commonly referred to as "ethical relativism" – can also be found in Masuzawa's *The Inventions of World Religions* (2005). According to her, the whole concept of world religions stems from the illegitimate European universalization of the

[10] Halliday refers to this Muslim view as 'particularist' in that it denies the relevance of human rights discourse in non-Western cultural settings (Halliday, 1995, 137).

concept of religion. Using Troeltsch's phenomenological concept of 'religion itself, as a unique sphere of life' as an example, Masuzawa claims:

> '[O]ur default position on the subject matter of religions is saturated by the world religions discourse, which thrives and survives precisely on this easy slippage from the particular (Euro-Christianity) to the general (religion as such). For, even without a thorough historical analysis, it seems obvious enough that the discourse of world religions takes for granted the idea of religions […] as "a unique sphere of life", and that it presumes that this sphere is prevalent throughout the world and its history' (Masuzawa, 2005, 313).

Such appeals for the potential cultural particularity of both moral standards and insider perspectives on the spiritual dimensions of non-Western societies (although the latter might be a more pressing issue in the context of Asian polytheistic and nontheistic spiritualties than in the context of Islamic monotheism), might be particularly important in Muslim minority contexts in the West, where issues of cultural identity play a special role. Here, one might argue, recognizing differences such as varying Muslim and Christian understandings of political authority, civil responsibility and human rights could serve to protect different senses of cultural and religious identity, improving perhaps mutual knowledge in multi-faith contexts.

This, however, should not imply that ethical relativists are right to assume that moral values, including those found in the UDHR, are never universal or that it is impossible to identify a common moral denominator within various religions. Specifically, the Second Parliament's promotion of the Golden Rule ('we must treat others as we wish others to treat us'), found in one form or another in the scriptures of all the world religions, is a promising start for an interreligious ethical consensus (The Parliament of the World Religions). What this analysis suggests, however, especially regarding issues of difference, is that ethical pluralisms – like Hick's unitary pluralism –, while

certainly possessing the potential of encouraging global interreligious collaboration, may not be a recommendable theoretical basis for interfaith dialogue, as they too are unable to truly appreciate differences in religious belief, moral standards and cultural identity. A better basis, as I shall argue in chapter 5, might therefore be found in (religiously non-specific) models of witnessing, based for example on a minimal virtue ethics centering on the notions of “humility”, “hospitality” and “friendship”.

3.4. The dignity of difference within interreligious relations

As indicated in chapter 2, *The Dignity of Difference* (2003), written by Sacks (Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth) can be seen as an influential contribution to the field of “difference-respecting” theories of interreligious relations. In this section, I shall use Sacks’s argument for the introduction of a new religious paradigm – the global recognition of the dignity of difference – as an important objection to the pluralist theories examined above. This argument rests on two premises: First, ‘the economics and politics of globalization have an inescapable moral dimension’ whose aim it must be ‘to enhance, not compromise, human dignity’ (Sacks, 2003, 3-4). And second, great responsibility to secure human dignity ‘lies within the world’s religious communities’, which against all expectation (that is much in contrast to what secularization theory predicted), have emerged in the twenty-first century ‘as key forces in a global age’ (Sacks, 2003, 4). Yet, neither tribalism nor universalism are adequate responses to the challenge of difference in this multi-faith world: Resurgent tribalism, e.g. in Muslim majority countries such as Pakistan or Iraq, it is evident, is inadequate because (as Sacks summarizes) ‘a tribal world is agonistic: a place of conflict where the strongest wins and honour and glory lie in fighting, even dying, in a noble cause’ (Sacks, 2003, 47). Universalism, however, as we have seen, may not always be a better solution

because it ignores the uniqueness of individual religions, by assuming that in times of conflict (between different cultures, traditions, nations, or social groups) all that ultimately matters are our commonalities (Sacks, 2003, 47).

According to Sacks, this view which has been ‘at the heart of Western civilization’ for at least two millennia is profoundly mistaken (Sacks, 2003, 48). He calls it ‘Plato’s ghost’, implying that the ghost of universalism, haunting Western thought, must finally be exorcized (Sacks, 2003, 48). Using Plato’s parable of the cave as an illustration, Sacks explains that for Plato the true essence of things is not matter (e.g. a particular tree) but form or ideas (the concept of Treeness), that is not the concrete embodiment of things in the world of senses but their conceptual essence. Thus, he argues, in Plato’s ‘world of ideas, difference is resolved into sameness’ and ‘[p]articulars give way to universals’ (Sacks, 2003, 49). What is problematic about this theory today is that it is frequently applied not just to physical objects like trees, but also to matters of truth. The true essence of things, Sacks claims, is where ‘trees become Treeness; where men become Man and apparent truths coalesce into Truth’ (Sacks, 2003, 49). In other words, truth (the essence of things) according to Western philosophy, are usually viewed as universal, thus building potential bases for human collaboration; whereas particularity tends to be seen as a classical ‘source of conflict, prejudice, error and war’ (Sacks, 2003, 49). When put to the practical test, however, universalism – especially as a political system – does not often lead to peace and harmony because it grants rights to outsiders only if they convert, conform, assimilate, and thus, cease to be outsiders (Sacks, 2003, 61). Empirical evidence for this can be found in the fact that Jews suffered under all five universalist cultures in the history of the West, the Alexandrian Empire, ancient Rome, medieval Christianity and Islam, and the Enlightenment, even though three of them (Greece, Rome and

the Enlightenment) 'prided themselves on their tolerance' (Sacks, 2003, 61). Sacks therefore concludes that it is time for us to exorcize the ghost of universalism, so influential in Western thought, recognizing, instead, the enriching power of 'difference as a source of value and society' (Sacks, 2003, 14).

The story of Abraham from which the three monotheisms, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, descend may provide a solid basis for this new religious paradigm. To counter the dualism of tribalism and universalism, Sacks argues, this story offers a third option, recognizing the dignity of difference in that it reverses the Platonic worldview. Instead of turning particulars into universals, Sacks explains, this story *begin*s with universal humanity (in the Genesis account of creation) and only 'then proceeds to the particular: one man, Abraham', thereby suggesting that universalism is the 'first, not the last phase in the growth of the moral imagination' (Sacks, 2003, 51). The same anti-universalist tendency is revealed later on in the story when God, having made his covenant with all mankind (understood here as the first universal moral code) decides again to turn to one particular people (the Israelites), commanding it to be different and thus '*teaching humanity to make space for difference*' (Sacks, 2003, 51, 53). At a time of global interconnectedness like ours, in which cultural and religious diversity has become part of the texture of everyday life (at work, in our families, on TV), it is therefore reasonable to claim that the most pressing task for any social order is to make space for otherness as well. Interfaith dialogue might then no longer have to be seen as a practice focusing primarily on similarities between religions (as unitary and ethical pluralisms seem to suggest), but rather as the art of embracing and perhaps even reconciling difference[11].

[11] It might be objected that Sacks's view of the world religions as global forces, responsible to secure human dignity, is itself somewhat universalistic in that it implies the existence of shared ethical standards within

3.5. Scriptural Reasoning as a difference-respecting practice

One form of interreligious exchange identifiable as such a difference-respecting practice is Scriptural Reasoning. Ford offers the following description: Scriptural Reasoning is a type of interdisciplinary, interfaith scriptural reading (mainly taking place between Jews, Christians and Muslims), which had its origin in the textual reasoning of the mid-twentieth century, conducted among Jewish text scholars (of Tanakh and Talmud), on the one hand, and Western philosophers on the other (Ford, 2006, 347). Unhappy about the lack of fruitful engagement between the two disciplines, these scholars (Cohen, Rosenzweig, Buber, Levinas), trained in both traditional Jewish interpretation and Western academic methods began to meet to study Jewish scriptures in dialogue with Western philosophy, thus bringing together classical Jewish exegesis and the practices of modern philosophical/theological reasoning (Ford, 2006, 347). Their main aim was to examine the role that post-Shoah Judaism might play in this world by interrogating both the Western modernity within which the Holocaust had been possible and also 'the resources – premodern, modern and postmodern – for responding to it within Judaism' (Ford, 2006, 347). They concluded that two things were particularly required from post-Shoah Judaism at that time: first, a new appropriation of its scriptures and traditions of interpretation; and second, a deeper engagement with people from other religions, especially Christians and Muslims. (Ford, 2006, 347). Later, in the 1990s, these inner-Jewish discussions, together with similar debates among Christian proponents of 'postcritical, "postliberal" hermeneutics' (such as Frei and Lindbeck) led to the development of what is known as "Abrahamic interfaith scripture study" – a practice

different cultures and religions. To avoid the charge of moral universalism, this thesis therefore proposes (in chapter 5) the idea of a "*minimal* ethical pluralism" based on a small set of virtues that are culturally unspecific.

conducted among the members of the three Abrahamic monotheisms. Today, such interfaith groups meet, for example, to read and discuss passages from their respective sacred texts thereby exploring the ways in which textual study can help them to understand and respond to pressing contemporary issues ranging from globalization and plurality to the Middle East conflict and Islamist terrorism.

The reason why Scriptural Reasoning might count as a difference-respecting practice is that it rests on the idea of 'Abrahamic collegiality', a principle aimed at interreligious friendship, not consensus (Ford, 2006, 348). Just like friends who do not necessarily have to agree upon everything in order to be friends, it is argued that members of different religions need not always arrive at a consensus on critical theological issues in order to engage with each other in mutual trust and friendship. An important notion used to describe the social dynamics of this encounter is that of a 'three-way mutual hospitality' on the basis of which 'each [religion] is host to the others and guest to the others', just as 'each welcomes the other two to their "home" scripture and its traditions of interpretation' (Ford, 2006, 349). Although consensus may happen in an atmosphere of hospitality (Ford concludes), a 'recognition of deep differences' is also possible (Ford, 2006, 349).

Difference-respecting practices like these are especially important in this global age of interconnectedness where much of human communication is controlled by the regulatory systems of modern information technologies such as the Internet, which have turned conversation into a virtual monologue. Askari argues that this cybernetic tendency criticized by philosophers writing as early as Camus or Buber (albeit still focusing on the forces of social, political and economic systems rather than technological advances then) has now developed an even stronger emphasis on

monologue that can only be overcome by a 'dialogical revolution' led by the world religions (Askari, 1992, 478-479). Christianity and Islam, he claims, are capable of setting a good example because of the special 'dialogical relationship' inherent in their scriptures. Specifically, the figure of Jesus, found in both the New Testament and the Qur'an, may provide room for Christian-Muslim encounter and might hence be regarded as a 'common sign between Christianity and Islam' (Askari, 1992, 481):

> 'In all such Qur'anic discourses [about the People of the Book], it is difficult to miss the deep feeling of Christianity and Islam being present to each other. One is aware of the other's presence. One is aware of strong disagreements. One is aware of deep sharing. What else could signify this deep sharing more than the fact that Jesus is the common center between Christians and Muslims? He is the word, speech, meaning, and occasion of the dialogical relationship between them. He is the common "Sign"' (Askari, 1992, 482).

Yet, here too it is worth noting that focusing on commonalities like these need not lead to perfect consensus about the spiritual role, nature and significance of the figure of Christ among Muslims and Christians. A sign, Askari argues, is by no means a 'technical truth' exchanged neutrally between strangers (Askari, 1992, 485). Quite the contrary: 'in spiritual matters, to know is to be in a new relationship with one who shares that knowledge. To know is to belong. Friendship is presupposed in common religious knowledge' (Askari, 1992, 485). So, here too, the metaphor of friendship makes space for difference. The fact that Christian and Muslim attitudes to Jesus are not identical is explained by 'the very ambiguity' or 'richness of the religious sign' itself, giving rise to different interpretations of it, thereby not just allowing but also creating dissimilarities (Askari, 1992, 485). Christian-Muslim exchanges, based on the principles of hospitality and friendship, we may therefore conclude, are useful examples of how the dignity of difference promoted by Sacks can be effectively preserved *in practice*. However, to return to the main focus of this thesis – the search

for a difference-respecting *theory* of interreligious relations – the next chapter will consider the possibility of a non-reductive version of pluralism that might serve as a corrective to Hick's hypothesis, thereby providing, perhaps, a solution to the problem of difference at a theoretical level, as well.

Chapter 4

Legenhausen's non-reductive corrective to Hick's pluralist hypothesis: A sound solution to the problem of difference?

4.1. Legenhausen's proposal: Islamic non-reductive religious pluralism

As the foregoing discussion demonstrates, there is little hope that classical pluralisms can ever be counted among the difference-respecting theories of interreligious relations. The main reason for this, I have argued, is that these types of pluralism are inherently reductive in that they tend to create an artificial unity between the religions by reducing religious differences to the lowest common denominator such as a shared basic belief in the Transcendent or adherence to common moral ideals. According to Legenhausen, however, the fate of pluralism as a potential theoretical framework for interfaith dialogue may not be sealed since a non-reductive version of it could solve the problem of difference. Legenhausen is an American philosopher and Christian convert to Shi'a Islam who taught philosophy of religion and ethics at the Islamic Iranian Academy of Philosophy from 1990 to 1994 and now (2014) teaches Western philosophy and Christianity at the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom, Iran. He is an advocate of interreligious dialogue, concentrating specifically on Muslim-Christian relations. Having experienced both Christianity and Islam from an insider viewpoint, Legenhausen (one might suggest) is in fact in a good position to offer a model for Muslim-Christian dialogue that could bridge the gulf between the pure participant perspectives of inclusivist approaches for example, and the objective observer perspectives of pluralist conceptions of religion, criticized by Van der Ven as too neutral for authentic interfaith exchange.

Let us therefore take a closer look at what Legenhausen proposes: Reductive pluralist taxonomies like Hick's pluralism, trying to typify religious experiences across religious boundaries, he argues, are inappropriate as they 'ignore the importance and contribution of the concepts and categories provided by a specific religious tradition to the religious experience itself' (Legenhausen, no date, [a]). In other words, Hick's theory, due to its constant focus on the *noumenon* as the only absolute in religious matters, does not take seriously the phenomenal realm of experience of individuals and groups of believers. Another proof for the incapacity of Hick's pluralism to make space for difference, Legenhausen states, can be found in the fact that the idea of divine revelation, so essential to the Abrahamic religions, is incompatible with it. Drawing on Alston's analysis of Hick's theory of the religious ambiguity of the universe, he writes:

> 'According to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, God truly reveals Himself to man. If He were to provide us with accounts of Himself that are couched in terms of one of the many ways in which He could appear to us, rather than in terms of what He is and does, revelations would be misleading at best and deceptive at worst' (Legenhausen, no date, [a])

The problem with this way of thinking, as we have already seen, is that it implies that religious traditions, including the outward religious forms developed by them, are not the result of separate divine revelations and hence, willed by God for whatever reason[12], but merely the product of different cultural constructions of the phenomenal Real. This substantial trivialization of the particular, it is obvious then, will hardly be capable of recognizing the dignity of difference so important to interfaith dialogue in a global age. Therefore, to cure religious pluralism of its reductiveness, Legenhausen

[12] From a (Sufi) Muslim perspective, for example, one might find reasons for the presence of religious diversity in the metaphysical principle of self-knowledge through divine self-disclosure (Shah-Kazemi, 2006, 115).

claims, it is necessary to provide a version of it that appreciates differences in belief, doctrine and practice as an integral part of religious experience and identity.

As chapter 2 revealed, Legenhausen is convinced that Shi'a theology – in particular the principle of the general limitlessness of God's grace, shared also by Roman Catholicism – provides all the resources needed to construct such a non-reductive, and hence difference-respecting, version of pluralism. This pluralism, he argues, may serve as a corrective to Hick's hypothesis because it provides motivation for tolerance without having to reduce irreconcilable differences between Muslims and Christians (such as different understandings of the oneness of God; the incarnation; the nature and role of Jesus Christ, etc.) to a common core. This is achieved through the following change of perspective: Instead of arguing that 'what is good about religions is what is common to a plurality of them', non-reductive pluralists take the view that 'each of a number of religions has unique features through which God may guide people, even if there is no common essence to all religions' (Legenhausen, 2006, 4). From this viewpoint, the particular beliefs and practices found in different traditions may then no longer have to be seen as obstacles in the way of an egalitarian interpretation of interreligious relations. On the contrary, what is unique to a variety of religions, according to this form of pluralism, is what gives them value in the first place (Legenhausen, 2009, 37).

Traditional Islamic theology, Legenhausen argues, provides sufficient room for such a view of religions: According to the famous *Hadith* of Abu Dharr about the total number of prophets, the identities of all the prophets, acknowledged as rightful messengers of the divine revelation, are not known. Abu Dharr reports that the Prophet (Muhammad) told him there had been one hundred and twenty-four

thousand prophets before him, of whom three hundred and fifteen were messengers of Allah. Given that we cannot know which ones of the pre-Islamic prophets were rightful messengers and which ones were hypocrites, Legenhausen claims, we must 'admit our ignorance in this matter' as 'an expression of humility before the judgment of Allah', thereby leaving open the question of 'how God may guide the sincere, and what beliefs are the result of a sincere quest for the truth' (Legenhausen, 2006, 115).

Furthermore, he argues, to understand how to approach the problem of diversity within the context of Islam, it is important to distinguish from each other the two issues of correct faith and salvation as clearly as possible:

> 'According to Islam, the correct religion ordained by God is that revealed to the last of His chosen prophets, Muhammad; this and no other religion is required by Allah of all mankind. In this sense, Islam is exclusivist. However, at various times prior to His final revelation, God ordained other religions by means of His prophets. So, the reason why the religion brought to Moses is not acceptable today is not that what Moses taught was wrong or incompatible with the teachings brought to Muhammad, for they taught basically the same things, but because God has ordained the latter teachings for this era' (Legenhausen, 2006, 73).

Thus, it is arguable that there are two senses of Islam: *general* Islam, understood in its literal sense as the complete submission to God's will, which includes all the divinely revealed religions; and *specific* Islam, which refers 'to the final version of Islam (in the general sense) brought by Muhammad' in the early seventh century CE (Legenhausen, 2006, 74). It is evident then that the previous teachings, followed by Jews and Christians for example, were not incorrect or insufficient to guide to salvation those for whom they were revealed (Legenhausen, 2006, 73, 96). Whether they still contain a soteriological quality, strong enough to guide non-Muslims to salvation now that specific Islam exists, however, is not for us to decide. Yet, what is certain at any stage in human history, Legenhausen concludes, is that it would be

highly arrogant to assume that God, whose grace is believed to be infinite, cannot or will not guide non-Muslims to salvation through their non-Muslim beliefs (Legenhausen, 2006, 114).

At first glance – one might object – this theory is incompatible with the traditional Muslim belief of the Seal of Prophethood: the fundamental conviction that Islam, in its specific sense, is ordained by Allah as the only religion to be followed legitimately in this era. Legenhausen, however, does not see any contradiction here. Again the distinction between correct faith and salvation solves the dilemma: Even though correct faith (including the belief in Islam as the final revelation) is theoretically and practically required of all people living today, it may not be necessary for salvation, simply because we cannot exclude the possibility that a person is saved by the grace of God even though this strict obligation of faith is not fulfilled (Legenhausen, no date, [a]). Drawing on the philosophical insights of the great Sufi theoretician Arabi, Legenhausen clarifies that the mere 'fact that God's truth can find expression in different, even, apparently conflicting, religions, does not mean that people are free to choose whatever religion suits their fancy' because there is no denying that 'all previously revealed religions become invalid (*balit*) with the revelation of the Qur'an'; and even though they may contain partial truth, it is still 'obligatory to follow the *shari'ah* of specific Islam' today (Legenhausen, 2006, 96). Yet, for those who choose or have already adopted an illegitimate religion such as Judaism or Christianity, not knowing that they are making a mistake, one might claim (following Legenhausen's argumentation), God's grace will always provide a "backdoor" to salvation.

This theory focusing on the mystery of the divine, Legenhausen suggests, is a much better approach to interreligious relations than the relativism of unitary pluralisms or

the syncretism of some modern spiritualties. Relativism is a barrier to meaningful interfaith discussion 'because it deprives one from [sic] the ability to criticize others or to seriously consider criticism'; syncretism undermines dialogue 'by condoning what is unacceptable by the mainstream of any of the traditions represented in dialogue' – the uncritical mixture of elements from different religions without a centre, focal point or integrating principle, to use Samartha's negative definition (Legenhausen, 2006, 119; Samartha, 1990, 255). Islamic non-reductive pluralism, on the contrary, instead of ignoring conflicting truth claims, 'can accept as granted that each person, rightly or wrongly, considers his own faith as the best […] while admitting that in other traditions there may be genuine religious and moral values to be appreciated' as well (Legenhausen, 2006, 120). This theory, it therefore seems, manages to incorporate both insider perspectives, by letting participants maintain the absolute validity of their own religious commitments, and outsider perspectives, by creating an openness to listening and learning from the other, thereby recognizing the dignity of difference within interfaith relations at least to some extent. This might explain why Barnes considers this approach as a potential corrective to Hick's pluralism.

4.2. Objection 1: Legenhausen's theory is not new – The link to Christian inclusivism

Yet, Legenhausen's attempt at solving the problem of difference involved in reductive pluralism is less successful than it appears. One objection against this theory is, for example, that it is ultimately based on inclusivist thinking – the very concept of interreligious relations that religious pluralism seeks to refute. Let us therefore examine this second category in Race's threefold typology, considered briefly in chapter 1, a little more closely. As we have seen, inclusivism in the context of Christian soteriology is the view that other religions, albeit possessing salvific

significance, only lead to salvation by virtue of the hidden work of Christ in them. Here D'Costa distinguishes between the following two types: *structural* and *restrictivist* inclusivisms (D'Costa, 2009, 19-25). What both views have in common, he argues, is that they see Christ's incarnation as absolutely necessary for the salvation of Christians and non-Christians alike – in contrast to religious pluralism, for which belief in Christ is only one pathway to salvation among others. The difference, however, is that *structural* inclusivists nevertheless affirm non-Christian religions as salvific in that they see them as important frameworks or structures through which the salvation offered by Christ is made possible, while *restrictivist* inclusivists reject this idea by insisting on the necessity of an 'epistemological relationship to Christ' for salvation (D'Costa, 2009, 24). The problem with these views of interreligious relations, as Legenhausen himself criticizes, is that they see Christianity as inherently superior to other religions in the sense that the salvific power ascribed to it is believed to exceed that of other religions (Legenhausen, 2006, 36-37). Hence, it is arguable that Christian inclusivists, convinced that their religion has an advantage over all others (here in terms of its efficacy in guiding people to salvation), cannot promote a truly egalitarian view of religions, e.g. one that does not focus disproportionately on those aspects of religious belief that are central to the Christian tradition. Thus, one might offer the criticism that concepts of interreligious relations approaching other religions from an *emic* Christian perspective tend to overemphasize the role and significance of salvation as an aspect of religious belief without taking into account what other central spiritual ideas and goals might be found in non-Christian religions (e.g. different concepts of morality, liberation, truth).

Of course, Legenhausen's non-reductive pluralism and Christian inclusivism are not comparable in terms of their reference to the necessity of Christ's incarnation for the

salvation of humankind. What is similar, however, is that they both attempt to solve the problem of diversity by adopting a soteriological perspective focusing primarily on the salvation of members of other faiths rather than on other spiritual dimensions such as matters of truth or practical experience. Thus, one might suggest that Legenhausen, like Christian inclusivists who hold that non-Christians can be saved even though the strict obligation of a personal belief in Christ is not fulfilled, promotes the soteriological theory that non-Muslims are potentially saved by the grace of God even though what Islam upholds as a strict obligation of faith (the belief in the Seal of Prophethood) is not fulfilled, either. Although Legenhausen's pluralism has certainly the advantage of centering on a more general aspect of religious belief – the mystery of the divine – than Christian inclusivism (with its focus on Christ's incarnation), which makes it accessible to non-Muslims without their having to adopt specifically Islamic doctrines or beliefs, it is still arguable that this inclusivist perspective on other religions, too, faces the charge of superiority.

Pluralist theories incorporating traces of inclusivist thinking, Legenhausen himself objects, are not truly egalitarian and must therefore be seen as a form of *degree pluralism* (Legenhausen, 2006, 15; no date [a]). He explains this as follows: In contrast to *equality pluralists* (like Byrne), who are committed to saying that different religions, sharing one or more particular values, are equal in the degree to which they have these values, *degree pluralists* claim that 'although each of several religions has some particular status, they do not have the status *equally*' (Legenhausen, 2009, 11). Yet, this is also true of Legenhausen's position. Given that only Islam enjoys the particular status of offering a guarantee for salvation, while all others ultimately depend on the mercy of God, it is evident that the salvific power of Islam is viewed by this form of pluralism as much more effective than that of other religions.

Fundamental differences in belief such as the Christian doctrine of incarnation as the only road to salvation, it is arguable then, cannot really be appreciated as equally respectable theories of salvation and must be graciously overlooked or ignored, instead. Furthermore, this theory is even considerably restricted in its scope in that it applies only to pre-Islamic Abrahamic religions that are believed to contain partial truth due to their special status as earlier revelations of the same divine message. Other religious traditions or spiritualties such as nontheist or polytheist religions, indigenous religions or simply younger religions and modern spiritualties that emerged after the foundation of Islam cannot participate in interfaith dialogue based on this narrow theoretical framework. Limiting the scope of applicability to such a great extent, we might therefore conclude, Legenhausen's proposal is not a very satisfying corrective to Hick's hypothesis.

4.3. Objection 2: Legenhausen's theory is not *non-reductive* – Religious differences as a result of "Christian incapability"

Another reason why Legenhausen's theory is not a thorough solution to the problem of difference is found in a closer analysis of the concept of *qasir* (the incapable) used as an important step in the argument. As we have seen, according to Legenhausen's thesis, followers of Abrahamic religions other than Islam (Jews and Christians) can be saved by the grace of God despite their ignorance of specific Islam as the final revelation – in short: despite their "incorrect" beliefs. Yet, as indicated above, this rule does not apply equally to all infidels, but only to those whose incorrect beliefs are the result of incapability to accept Islam as their religion, for example because people growing up in Western cultures might adopt Christianity naturally as their religion without knowing that they 'are making a mistake' (Legenhausen, 2006, 111). Thus, Legenhausen specifies: 'Jews and Christians, despite irreconcilable differences in

their beliefs with the teachings of Islam, may also be saved, *provided that their incorrect belief is through no fault of their own*' (Legenhausen, no date, [a], my emphasis). In other words, what counts is not the incorrect belief in a religion other than Islam itself, but rather the reason for upholding this belief. Here, Shi'a theology distinguishes clearly between two concepts: *qasir* (the incapable) and *muqqasir* (the negligent). Drawing on Mutahhari's modern interpretation of this concept, Legenhausen explains:

> '[T]he threat of damnation is conditioned not merely on disbelief or incorrect belief, but on sinful disbelief or incorrect belief. Wrong belief is not sinful for those who are incapable (*qasir*), but only for the negligent (*muqqasir*) [those who know in the depths of their heart that Islam is true, but do not act in accordance with it]' (Legenhausen, no date, [a]).

This theory has interesting implications for the practice of interfaith dialogue. Since we cannot tell whether those who follow religions other than Islam are making that mistake 'sinfully or excusably' (for the answer to this question lies within the heart of the believer), Legenhausen claims, 'where good relations with non-Muslims are possible without condoning injustice, the presumption of an honest mistake is morally incumbent upon us' (Legenhausen, no date, [a]). On the basis of this principle, he concludes, Muslims living in Western contexts, for example, can engage in constructive dialogue and collaboration with Christians without having to ignore, for the sake of harmony, the significance of religious and cultural differences existing between them.

Yet, this argument is inherently inconsistent. First, one might criticize that Legenhausen's non-reductive pluralism does not appreciate differences between Muslims and Christians as something which is valuable in its own right, but merely as inevitable side-products of the "Christian incapability" of choosing the right religion.

Much in contrast to Sacks's idea of religious differences as 'a source of value and society', Legenhausen simply sees them as mistakes, albeit ones that may be permissible if God wills. Moreover, viewing partners in dialogue as *a priori* limited in their capacities (whether cognitive, psychological, emotional or spiritual) destroys the atmosphere of respect necessary to create an egalitarian framework for interreligious collaboration. Even if Legenhausen's theory allows for irreconcilable differences between religions, as he stresses so often, it is hard to see how it could ever provide motivation for genuine acceptance and respect for these differences, given the rather condescending attitudes towards non-Muslim religions and their particular characteristics involved in the argument. This leads us to the realization that Legenhausen's theory is anything but *non-reductive*. Viewing religious differences as a product of "Christian incapability", thereby implying that they would not exist, had all non-Muslims already discovered the truth of Islam, is tantamount to denying the very significance, if not reality, of the differences themselves: If a particular doctrine such as the Christian doctrine of incarnation, for example, is viewed by a Muslim participant in dialogue merely as a manifestation of incorrect faith, it is questionable how such a person would recognize the theological significance of this difference in belief and the role it might play in dialogue situations (e.g. as a topic for discussion whose consideration might further mutual knowledge and understanding).

Regarding issues of difference, it is arguable then, Legenhausen's theory is even more reductive than Hick's pluralist hypothesis: Hick only reduces religious differences to the lowest common denominator – a shared belief in the Real *an sich* – without making a value judgment on how people interpret and express this belief; whereas Legenhausen sees differences as potentially excusable aberrations from the one and only true message of Islam. This, however, reduces the particularities

(specific beliefs, doctrines, practices) of non-Muslim religions to the level of falsity thereby ignoring the value those differences might have for people engaging with other religions in this multi-faith world. We may therefore conclude that Legenhausen's proposal of a non-reductive religious pluralism, rooted in Islamic theology, ultimately fails to be non-reductive and thus cannot count as a successful solution to the problem of difference involved in reductive pluralisms. Still pursuing the search for a difference-respecting theory of interreligious relations, I shall therefore, in the next chapter, consider a few alternative approaches to interfaith dialogue that also involve pluralist thinking, but might be in a better position to truly appreciate differences.

Chapter 5

Alternative approaches to Muslim-Christian dialogue: Towards a (religiously non-specific) model of witnessing

5.1. Sufi universalism and the principle of *tawhid*

Given that Legenhausen's attempt at curing religious pluralism of its incapacity to recognize religious differences as important resources for interfaith dialogue by offering a non-reductive version of it has failed, we might ask ourselves whether the pluralist approach as a whole is too flawed to be ever transformed into a difference-respecting theory. Specifically, it seems, neither reductive nor non-reductive versions manage to bridge the gulf between insider and outsider perspectives on interfaith issues. While classical pluralisms (Hick, Panikkar, Knitter) try to adopt objective observer perspectives that do not value, sufficiently, the role that insider views must play in dialogue situations, Legenhausen's theory, in the very attempt to be non-reductive, slips back into inclusivist thinking thereby concentrating too much on potential attitudes to other religions found in a particular tradition (Shi'a Islam) without being open to other religious convictions. Although there is nothing wrong with the attempt at drawing on the particular theologies of Islam and Christianity when trying to establish a theoretical framework for constructive Muslim-Christian dialogue, it is questionable whether the positions developed by such religiously specific approaches will ever be general enough to apply to several traditions in the same way. To test this thesis (and to exclude the unlikely scenario that only theories *based on Shi'a theology* fail to recognize differences), this chapter will look at two other religiously specific approaches to interfaith dialogue provided by Sufism and Quakerism. These approaches, rooted in the mystic traditions of Islam and Christianity respectively are particularly promising candidates for the creation of a

difference-respecting theory for Muslim-Christian dialogue because – as we will see – they already incorporate, in one way or another, pluralist thinking as an integral part of their worldviews, while also staying committed to their own spiritual history. Drawing on the wisdom of the mystics, one might suggest, could therefore be an effective means of fusing *emic* and *etic* approaches into a new hybrid category of interfaith theories capable of recognizing the significance of difference within interreligious relations.

The main difference between Sufi universalism and classical (reductive) pluralisms, when considered as potentially egalitarian frameworks for dialogue, is that Sufism traditionally sees religious diversity as divinely ordained as opposed to humanly constructed (Shah-Kazemi, 2006, xiv, xxv, 113-115). In *The Other in the Light of the One* (2006), Shah-Kazemi argues, for example, that the Qur'an 'explicitly refers to the divine ordainment of religious diversity' thereby 'uphold[ing] the spiritual value of the diverse religious paths' as 'outwardly divergent facets of a single, universal revelation by the unique and indivisible Absolute' (Shah-Kazemi, 2006, xiv-xv). He chooses verse V: 48 as an illustration[13]:

> *'For each We have appointed from you a Law and a Way. Had God willed, He could have made you one community. But in order that He might try you by that which He hath given you* [He hath made you as you are]. *So vie with one another in good works. Unto God ye will all return, and He will inform you of that wherein ye differed* (in Shah-Kazemi, 2006, xv).

At first glance, this view of religions as different paths to the same ultimate reality seems to be similar to the core idea of pluralism, but the difference between seeing diversity as divinely willed (as the Sufi hermeneutics applied here reveals) and seeing it as a cultural product (as Hick's pluralism implies) is crucial: While Sufi universalists

[13] Other Qur'anic passages that might be seen as proof-texts for the divine ordainment of religious diversity are XLI: 43, XLII: 13 and II: 62.

claim that religions including their external forms are the result of distinct divine revelations offered by God to particular cultures at particular times, pluralists tend to regard them as culturally conditioned, human interpretations of the Absolute and hence, to some extent, as deviations from that which is beyond human description. As we have seen in chapters 2 and 3, pluralism – although certainly intended as an egalitarian view of religions, tries to make religions equally valuable by reducing their differences to a common core, which trivializes the particular and ultimately contradicts the Abrahamic belief in divine revelations. Sufi universalism, conversely, is capable of proclaiming 'the necessity of dialogue' in religiously diverse contexts without having to question, let alone deny, the legitimacy of this diversity in the first place (Shah-Kazemi, 2002, 154; 2006, 115). As Shah-Kazemi argues, Nasr's universalism, for example (a perennial philosophy that he sees as largely identical with his own position) is founded 'upon the complementarity between the particular forms and the universal essence of religion, and thus upholds the irreducible character – the divinely willed uniqueness – of each of the revealed religions' (Shah-Kazemi, 2006, 250). This approach, he therefore claims, is much more 'respectful of real difference – in the face of an essential unity which transcends forms' than Hick's pluralism, which seeks to eliminate religious differences for the sake of an artificial unity that is inevitably vague and disloyal to the self-definition of individual traditions (Shah-Kazemi, 2006, 250). Universalism, in contrast, does not have this problem: Given that 'a genuine receptivity to the underlying, universal substance of religion' is not a hindrance to individual identity-formation and may also strengthen 'the roots of one's own particular tradition', Shah-Kazemi argues, universalists are generally able to grant others the right to uphold the particularities of their own faith, while also remaining committed to their own spiritual heritage (Shah-Kazemi, 2006, 254, 256).

Shah-Kazemi's interpretation of the principle of *tawhid* (the Islamic doctrine of the absolute oneness of God) is a key instrument within this view of religions. Drawing on al-Kashani's classical ontological conception of *tawhid*, Shah-Kazemi defines this principle (commonly translated as "There is but one true God") not only as the monotheistic declaration of the oneness of God to the exclusion of other deities, but also, and more fundamentally, as 'the affirmation of a unique reality […] in relation to which all otherness is ultimately unreal' (Shah-Kazemi, 2006, 75). This can be explained as follows: From a Sufi universalist perspective, the oneness of reality – a metaphysical principle incorporating both unity and multiplicity – does not exclude diversity, 'but implies it, embraces it and integrates it' without slipping into relativism (Shah-Kazemi, 2006, 75). Thus, it is arguable that *tawhid* excludes all relativity in the sense that it is absolute, but also includes all existence, *however diverse it may be*, because multiplicity is metaphysically contained within the absoluteness of the One (Shah-Kazemi, 2006, 88). In other words, *tawhid* is both 'oneness in diversity' and 'diversity in oneness', thereby inviting all human beings to 'contemplate the vision of the One in the many, and the many in the One' (Shah-Kazemi, 2006, 88). From this position, interfaith dialogue may then be viewed in an entirely new light: Instead of being necessitated solely by external, *non-spiritual*, circumstances (the pluralist idea of religious diversity as a cultural product), dialogue between Muslims and Christians, for example, becomes something greater than a social duty: It is a desire for greater knowledge of the One revealed in the particular characteristics of both the other as well as oneself. This complex metaphysical theory certainly needs some reflection, but before evaluating it in terms of its difference-respecting qualities, I shall set it in relation to a similar view of religions found in Quakerism.

5.2. Quakerism and the notion of "That of God in everyone"

Contemporary Quakers or the Religious Society of Friends – identified by Woodhead as part of 'Mystical Christianity' (as opposed to 'Church' and 'Biblical Christianity'[14]) – consider themselves as a Christian denomination with relatively little dogmatic theology with the exception of the central unifying doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers", the foundational concept of Protestantism derived from 1 Peter 2: 9 in the New Testament (Woodhead, 2004, 104). One fundamental idea within Quaker religious thought, however, that is sometimes even declared as 'the Quakers' creed' is the notion of "That of God in everyone" or "That of God in every man"[15] as it is traditionally worded (Benson, 1970, 21). As Benson explains, the idea that there is literally a bit of God in every man goes back to Fox's interpretation of a passage in Romans 1 paraphrased by him as: 'that which may be known of God is manifest in man, for God has showed it unto them' (Fox, 1831, 55). "That of God", Benson argues, can therefore be interpreted as the belief that '[i]n every man there is a witness for God that summons him to remember the Creator' (Benson, 1970, 5). This "something of God" finds expression in quite a few metaphorical descriptions: It is a *hunger* for the knowledge of the Absolute put into man by the Divine; a *voice*, both personal and transcendent, that speaks to man and through him; or a *light* with which everyone that comes into the world is inherently enlightened, to mention but a few of the synonyms listed by Benson (Benson, 1970, 6, 13). What is important for our purpose, though, is to look at how "That of God", believed to be dwelling in everyone, is to be answered from a Quaker perspective. According to Benson's interpretation of

[14] According to Woodhead, Church Christianity comprises Catholicism, Anglicanism and Protestantism, which can be further subdivided into conservative, liberal and Pentecostal strands each characterized by their respective understanding of authority as transcendent, rational and experiential; Biblical Christianity includes Evangelicalism, similarly dividable into fundamental, liberal and charismatic movements; and Mystical Christianity consists of Mystical Eastern Orthodoxy (transcendent authority), Christian Science (rational authority) and finally Quakerism (experiential authority) (Woodhead, 2004, 104).

[15] The gender-specific expression of "That of God in every man" is found, for example, in the works and journals of George Fox, see for example Fox (1831) and Penney (ed.) (2007).

Fox, one way of answering the divine light in everyone is through trying to establish a unity among the believers, here, in the context of traditional Foxian theology: 'a unity in the Christian community', which Fox saw (in the seventeenth century), rather naively perhaps, as a place of only *temporary* diversity (Benson, 1970, 16).

In the twentieth century, however, the notion of "That of God", like Shah-Kazemi's view of *tawhid*, has developed a more universalistic meaning, extending its application to all human beings as a means 'to cultivate love and tolerance' also in situations of '*permanent* diversity' (Benson, 1970, 16). Thus, Jones writes in 1904 that the 'larger truth' implicit in Fox's works is that there is a 'universal principle' hidden in the notion of "That of God" that sees 'something Divine, something of God', in every human being regardless of which particular spiritual path, if any, the latter may follow (Jones in Benson, 1970, 18). This principle, like the concept of *tawhid*, may therefore be seen as a powerful means of establishing an egalitarian view of religions and of humanity itself, rooted in the universal ideas of respect, tolerance and peace. Thus, literature published by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC[16]), for example, explicitly promotes the notion of "That of God" as *the* reason of our time for upholding the traditional Quaker attitude against the taking of human life in war and capital punishment[17] (Benson, 1970, 19). The logic behind this argument is self-evident: If there is something Divine in all human beings, regardless of issues of race, gender, or belief, committing violence against any human being always amounts to violence against the very Divinity inherent in them, thereby

[16] Here, Benson refers to the AFSC-publication *Who Shall live?* (1970).

[17] More information about the traditional Quaker attitude against violence can be found in the Quaker Peace Testimony of 1660, included in the online sources of chapter 7. A modern version of it, provided by the Guilford College, North Carolina, in 1967, is found in Durnbaugh (ed.) (1978), pp. 300-305.

depriving those who commit violence of the opportunity to recognize and experience God in the Other.

The concepts of human nature revealed in *tawhid* and "That of God", one might suggest, are reminiscent of Buber's reflections on the *I-Thou* relationship – an existentialist theory, influenced by Jewish mysticism (Hasidism), that sees the basis of human existence as ultimately dialogical (Buber, 2013). According to this theory, existence may be generally addressed in two ways: first, as the attitude of the *I* towards an *it* or intentional object that is separate in itself and may hence be used or experienced by the *I* (*I-it* relationship); and second, as the attitude of the *I* towards *Thou*, in which case the other is not separated from the *I*, thus enabling both to enter into genuine dialogue with each other (*I-Thou* relationship) (Buber, 2013, 6-9). Here, too, it is assumed that God, the 'Eternal Thou', reveals himself in the many human *Thous*, that is in the dialogical *I-Thou* relationship that exists between humans. Therefore, Buber argues, human life finds meaningfulness not in the *I* (individual existence) but 'between the *I* and *Thou*' (community) – the place where God is most readily encountered (Buber, 2013, 39). This, it is arguable, makes a strong case for a human solidarity stretching beyond religious boundaries. Buber writes in this context: 'The free man is he who […] believes in the real solidarity of the real twofold entity *I* and *Thou* (Buber, 2013, 59). For this reason, he argues, the dialogical *I-Thou* relationship is the only relation in the world where exclusiveness and inclusiveness are truly reconciled: Only in the relation with God, *experienced through the other*, unconditioned exclusiveness (found in the 'realm of separation' where the other is treated as an intentional object instead of a *Thou*) and unconditioned inclusiveness (the dissolution of all individualization) are 'one and the same, in which the whole universe is implied' (Buber, 2013, 23, 99). Drawing on the wisdom of the mystics

(whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim), this analysis suggests, could therefore truly be a valuable resource for constructive interfaith dialogue aimed at conciliation and solidarity.

Yet, the problem with this approach, as indicated above, is that it is too specific in its spiritual orientation (mysticism) to be made normative in dialogue situations between Christians and Muslims. Although both traditions, Sufism and Quakerism, due to their particular esoteric understandings of human nature, certainly have the potential to mediate identities of people from different faiths by fusing insider and outsider perspectives into a new metaphysical whole, it is the very particularity of those traditions themselves that ultimately limits the applicability of their concepts of interreligious relations. Thus, it is arguable that Islamic mysticism, with its constant stress on *iman* (the esoteric as opposed to exoteric aspects of Islam) is too restricted in its spiritual focus to include the perspectives of orthodox Muslims, who might simply not share the same esoteric worldview. Similarly, in the case of Christianity, conservative Catholics, for example, characterized by a belief in 'transcendent authority', might find the idea of "That of God in everyone" – an obvious expression of 'experiential authority' – rather strange, which could make them unwilling to even consider it as a basis for interfaith dialogue (Woodhead, 2004, 104). Using the insights of Sufi universalism or Quakerism as normative theories of interreligious relations, it is evident then, would not do justice to the diversity that exists both between, but also within individual religions and sometimes even within particular branches of these traditions. Here, one might point to the fact that neither evangelical nor traditional conservative Quaker understandings of Christianity are fully compatible with the aforementioned liberal interpretation of "That of God", found in

the context of the ‘enlightened Christian Platonism’ of the twentieth century (Benson, 1970, 18).

Another criticism one might raise against the use of *tawhid* and “That of God” as universal principles of interfaith relations is that both positions obviously assume the existence of a single deity, thereby implying the truth of monotheism without taking into account how polytheist and nontheist religions could be included in this view of religions. Even if the insights offered by Sufism and Quakerism have the potential to enrich dialogue between followers of monotheist religions, it is difficult to see how they could ever be useful outside those traditions. Seeing religiously specific concepts like these as universally applicable, we might therefore conclude, would in itself be a case of ignoring the significance of religious diversity (external and internal) within interreligious relations. This suggests that interfaith dialogue, to be truly sensitive to issues of difference, might need neither an objective pluralist framework, ignorant of *emic* perspectives on (inter-)faith issues, nor a religiously specific approach, which is insufficiently objective, but simply a *combination of both approaches*. The last two sections of this chapter will therefore introduce as a difference-respecting alternative what I term the “model of witnessing”, based on the framework of minimal ethical pluralism.

5.3. A (religiously non-specific) model of witnessing

The main advantage of using the idea of being a witness to one’s own faith as a fundamental principle for interfaith dialogue is that the act of witnessing has a uniquely individual character – in that it allows religious adherents to present and value their own *emic* perspectives on (inter-)faith issues – without necessarily crossing the line to exclusivism or proselytism. Muslims living in minority contexts

such as Western plural societies, for instance, when considering themselves as witnesses of Islam, have the opportunity of living authentically as Muslims in non-Muslim contexts thus transforming the *shahada* (the testimony of faith through the formulation of "I bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is His prophet"'[18]) as part of everyday life and religious practice. In *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (2004), Ramadan argues, for example, that this testimony of faith, based on verse 16: 125[19] in the Qur'an and traditionally understood as a call to Islam, need not be interpreted as 'a matter of wanting to convert, because people's hearts are God's domain', but rather as 'a matter of bearing witness, which is an invitation to remember and meditate' (Ramadan, 2004, 2008). Drawing on verse 2: 143, Ramadan therefore urges Western Muslims 'to bear witness', *with their lives*, 'to the truth before mankind' thereby establishing a view of interreligious dialogue as 'a meeting of "witnesses" who are seeking to live their faiths', sharing their convictions and 'engag[ing] with one another for a more humane, more just world, closer to what God expects of humanity' (Ramadan, 2004, 208).

Thus, he replaces the traditional Islamic dualism, dividing the world into *dar al-Islam* (abode of Islam), and *dar al-harb* (abode of war) – by militant Muslims sometimes associated with the West – with the single, unifying category of *dar al-shahada* (abode of testimony) (Ramadan, 2004, 72). Instead of interpreting the West as the 'world of infidels' as literalist interpretations of Islam suggest, he claims, Western Muslims who see themselves as witnesses of Islam, 'positive and sure of themselves', have the responsibility to 'remind the people around themselves of God

[18] The *shahada* is the first of the Five Pillars of Islam and may be viewed as 'the foundation […] of *"being a Muslim"* (Ramadan, 2004, 257).

[19] Qur'an 16: 125: 'Call [invite] to the path of your Lord using wisdom and good exhortation, and debate with them in the best of manner' (in Ramadan, 2004, 208).

and spirituality'; and when it comes to social issues, they are called by the *shahada* to be 'actively involved in supporting values and morality, justice and solidarity' (Cesari, 2004, 171; Ramadan, 2004, 73). Yet, this does not mean that they have to give up their own identity and passively submit to their environment: Once their position as witnesses is secure, Muslims – no matter where they are in the world – can live their lives authentically as reflections of their personal beliefs and convictions, thereby becoming 'a positive influence' within the unified world of testimony (Ramadan, 2004, 73). Using the idea of witnessing as a basis for interfaith dialogue, one might therefore conclude, opens new horizons, in which shared spiritual insights as well the unshared particularities of individual faiths are recognized and appreciated as authentic expressions of varying religious and cultural identities.

It is important to note, though, that the concept of witnessing, although considered here from a Muslim viewpoint, is in itself *religiously non-specific* and can hence be utilized by adherents of any religious tradition. In contrast to Legenhausen's Shi'a version of pluralism, Sufi universalism, or modern liberal Quakerism, whose spiritual outlooks are clearly rooted in the respective theologies of these traditions, models of witnessing are religiously neutral and do not invite certain groups of believers to the exclusion of others. Another advantage, as Ramadan's reflections reveal, is that the idea of witnessing is clearly distinguished from proselytism, while nonetheless offering room for the expression of insider views of religious adherents. Thus, it is arguable that even though the boundaries between witnessing and proselytism may sometimes appear to be blurry, the two issues are sufficiently distinct in the following sense: While proselytism is a conscious attempt to convert others to one's own religion and is therefore carried out for this reason only, bearing witness (as I

understand it) is an act of interreligious engagement that sees expressing and sharing one's spiritual convictions as an end in itself enabling people from different faiths to understand and learn from one another.

This differentiates the model of witnessing from Sufi universalism. As Shah-Kazemi specifies, the universalism promoted by him can also be seen as a form of *da'wa*, the Islamic concept of proselytism, translated literally as "call to Islam" (Shah-Kazemi, 2010, 234). For him, universalism 'is a way of resolving [the] outward incompatibility' between *da'wa* and the possible Muslim view of interfaith dialogue as a 'regrettable necessity, occasioned by a world in which power and wealth just happen to be concentrated in the hands of non-Muslims' (Shah-Kazemi, 2010, 235). The reason why *da'wa* and interfaith dialogue are reconcilable in universalism, he argues, is that the specific hermeneutics of Sufism promoted by him enables Muslims:

> 'to present an `invitation´ to study the universality that is undoubtedly present in the Qur'an, together with the profound Sufi perspectives on key Qur'anic verses, as a most – possibly the most – effective and appropriate manner in which to `call` to Islam' (Shah-Kazemi, 2010, 235).

Confusing interfaith dialogue with proselytism, however, is problematic because it reintroduces the logic of superiority, involved in exclusivism, inclusivism and degree pluralism, into the sphere of dialogue. The model of witnessing, by contrast, remains much more neutral in that it offers room for the expression of our innermost spiritual beliefs without prompting us to persuade others of these convictions or encouraging us to engage in the rather divisive practice of apologetics. People who regard interreligious dialogue as an extension of their missionary activities or simply as a

chance to engage in positive apologetics[20], it might further be argued, focus their attention too much on their side of the debate, thus being unable to appreciate differences as potential sources of spiritual contemplation or ways of learning from one another.

This shows that models of witnessing do not only have an advantage over religiously specific approaches, but also, and more significantly, over theories of religious pluralism. Despite their capacity to approach interfaith issues objectively – an aim also shared by pluralism – such models clearly do not have to reduce differences to a common core to produce a vague unity that ultimately ignores the significance of the particularities of religious traditions. Offering room for the expression of insider perspectives of different religions while being religiously non-specific enough to give equal status to these views without encouraging proselytism or apologetics, the model of witnessing bridges, in fact, the gulf between *emic* and *etic* perspectives created by other approaches very effectively. One of the reasons why this is the case is that bearing witness to one's own faith while also listening to the testimonies of others requires from participants in dialogue the development of a special quality: Apart from the neutral exchange of information (on the basis of which participants would not enter into any real relationship, but engage in interreligious dialogue only cognitively) the act of witnessing requires from them an important *perspective exchange*, both cognitive and affective. Van der Ven explains this as follows: By means of this 'socioemotional disposition' people may 'switch to the perspective of the other and […] experience and interpret situations, other people, and themselves the way in which the other would' (Van der Ven, 2006, 435). Thus, they are able to

[20] Positive apologetics is defined by Griffiths as 'a discourse designed to show that the ordered set of doctrine-expressing sentences constituting a particular religious community's doctrines is cognitively superior, in some important respect(s), to that constituting another religious community's doctrines' (Griffiths, 1991, 14).

‘understand, comprehend, and appreciate the other’s desires, intentions, hopes, and expectations from that person’s perspective, which makes them ‘sensitive to their goals, disappointment and aims’ (Van der Ven, 2006, 435). Given that both perspectives (the self-perspective and the other perspective) are necessarily participant perspectives, as opposed to observer perspectives, Van der Ven argues, both partners, by proceeding from their own participant view and trying to adopt the other’s, automatically aim at ‘mutual participation’ (Van der Ven, 2006, 436). Fusing insider and outsider perspectives in this way without ignoring the particularities of individual views, we might therefore conclude, the model of witnessing is a much more recommendable basis for interfaith dialogue than religiously specific approaches or reductive pluralisms.

5.4. The model of witnessing combined with minimal ethical pluralism

The conclusion that models of witnessing are better frameworks for interfaith dialogue than pluralist theories, however, does not entail that the concept of pluralism itself is of no use in dialogue situations. Just because pluralist conceptions of interreligious relations, due to their unique unifying tendencies, have the disadvantage of underestimating the significance of difference when used as the only theoretical framework for interfaith dialogue, does not mean that they cannot complement models already sensitive to issues of difference. Specifically, one might claim, ethical pluralisms – when embedded in the religiously non-specific theory of witnessing – have the potential to increase our awareness of similarities that exist between the moral ideals of different religions without having to use, as their main frame of reference, only those values found in a particular tradition. Thus, I have argued in chapter 3, the global ethics projects initiated by Küng, Knitter or Ruland are not doomed to failure because there is no such thing to be found in the world

religions as a shared basic morality, but simply because the vision promoted by them – the emergence of a critical corporate conscience rooted in a global network of shared moral ideals – is somewhat too big to be put into practice. For this reason, Ruland's appeal for a global virtue ethics, viewed by him as the ideal motivation for interreligious collaboration, faces the charge of Eurocentricism as it appears to universalize the moral ideals of Western liberalism (e.g. the rights and freedoms established in the UDHR) into 'a conscience across borders' (Ruland, 2002). Therefore, to benefit from the unifying power of ethical pluralism without risking disregard of the potential cultural particularity of moral standards, it is sensible to combine our model of witnessing with a version of pluralism that is somewhat weaker than the theories provided by classical ethical pluralists.

One set of virtues on which this "minimal ethical pluralism", as I would call it, could center are the principles of mutual hospitality and potential friendship, already examined in the context of Ford's presentation of Scriptural Reasoning. Like participants in interfaith study groups, focusing on scriptural study, members of interfaith projects who see themselves as witnesses to their own faith, whether engaged in general philosophical/ethical discussion or specific intra-communal debates, may thus acknowledge the sacredness of the others' beliefs and practices without having to aim at a consensus that might gloss over differences or avoid argument in the first place. This hospitality, based on politeness and mutual trust, Ford argues, possesses the potential to turn into friendship and might therefore be 'the most tangible anticipation of future peace' (Ford, 2006, 350). Another moral ideal, which is not culture-specific and could hence be used as a basis for a shared minimal virtue ethics, is humility. Schillinger argues that Christian and Muslim understandings of the concept of humility (although differing in their particular

theological interpretations revealed, for example, in the classical accounts of humility of Clairvaux and Al-Ghazali respectively) share a common underlying structure relating to the practice of interfaith dialogue in important ways (Schillinger, 2012, 364). On both accounts, he argues, humility curtails 'the self's intellectual pride' thus possibly creating in participants in dialogue an 'improved ability to understand and appreciate others' points of view' and 'making space for their flourishing' (Schillinger, 2012, 372). Yet, given that the concept of humility itself is not objective-oriented (e.g. it is not necessarily linked to egalitarianism), it is open enough to invite members of different traditions – and branches of traditions – to engage in interreligious exchanges in intellectually humble ways without having to give up their own particular views of interreligious relations (exclusivist, inclusivist, pluralist, etc.) (Schillinger, 2012, 379).

The model of witnessing, especially when combined with minimal ethical pluralism, one might argue as a final step in this discussion, is capable of motivating joint action. Instead of encouraging proselytism (as religiously specific approaches tend to do), members of interfaith projects who consider themselves as witnesses to their own faith, might for example use the power and insights of witnessing to respond not only in spiritually, but also socially and politically adequate ways to particular events or conflicts, both local and global, that challenge religious communities today. The Clapham and Stockwell Faith Forum in England, albeit not explicitly based on the idea of witnessing, might be used as a practical example here: In 'Facing Challenges Together' (2008), Robertson explains that this local multi-faith group, consisting of Christians, Muslims, Jews and Hindus, has the primary purpose to 'bring together people of all faiths and none' to respond collectively to both world events and local concerns (Robertson, 2008, 35). After the London bombings on July 7 in 2005 and

the Stockwell shooting[21] two weeks later, for instance, members of the faith forum tried to find a united response, or a joint statement, capable of 'defy[ing] the bombers' attempt to create divisions' between different faith communities (Robertson, 2008, 37). They decided to translate their chosen statement – 'No act of aggression will break us apart' – into symbolic form by creating a 'peace mala rope[22]' to be held in a circle by people from different faiths during public events as a demonstration of their unity and as an invitation for others to join in (Robertson, 2008, 38-9). Yet, in contrast to reductive pluralist attempts at creating unity among the religions by reducing differences to a common core, this particular act, despite its obviously unifying force, can be seen as a difference-respecting practice. When faced with the proposition to simply hold hands in a circle as a symbol of harmony, one Muslim member of this group objected that such an act might keep many Muslims from joining in because men holding hands with women is not always permitted in Islam (Robertson, 2008, 38). The particular choice of a rope as a unifying symbol, one might therefore suggest, can be seen as a result of respecting the testimony of faith (here regarding issues of gender separation within Islam) of a particular individual. Here, too, the notion of friendship seems to have played an important role as the following statement reported by Robertson reveals: '[If we held] hands in a circle to show our strength and solidarity, […] it would be impossible for our Muslim *friends* to join in' (Robertson, 2008, 38, my emphasis). Interfaith models based on the idea of witnessing, combined with a minimal virtue ethics centering on the notions of humility, hospitality and above all, friendship, we may therefore conclude, solve the problem of

[21] On July 22 in 2005, the Brazilian Menezes, misidentified as one of the fugitives involved in the attempted bombings of July 21, was shot dead by a police officer of the London Metropolitan police at Stockwell tube station.

[22] *Mala* is the word used by Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists for prayer beads (Robertson, 2008, 37).

difference involved in classical pluralisms more effectively than the religiously specific approaches of Sufism, Quakerism or Legenhausen's Shi'a position.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1. Introduction

The overall aim of this research was to clarify whether Legenhausen's non-reductive corrective to Hick's pluralist hypothesis is a successful solution to the problem of difference within interreligious relations, which would make it a difference-respecting and perhaps, recommendable theoretical basis for constructive interfaith dialogue. The specific research objectives were:

- to *summarize* and *examine* pluralist positions, both as approaches to interfaith dialogue and as concepts of religion, concentrating particularly on Hick's pluralist hypothesis and its implications for the study of religions.
- to *identify* and *evaluate critically* objections against such pluralist positions, especially the problem of difference involved in Hick's pluralism.
- to *introduce* Legenhausen's non-reductive pluralism as a possible solution to this problem and hence, a potential corrective to Hick's position.
- to *examine* the extent to which this Islamic version of pluralism differs from Christian inclusivism and its tendency towards claims of spiritual superiority.
- to *formulate* recommendations on interfaith issues such as the promotion of a specific model for interfaith dialogue, sensitive to issues of difference.

This section will revisit the five research objectives above, summarize the findings of the project and offer conclusions based on these findings. Recommendations specific to the evidence presented in the critical analysis as well as suggestions for future

research will be discussed; and the contribution of this research to the field of interfaith dialogue will be clarified. By adopting this structure it is intended that the research will be concluded so as to reflect on whether or not the individual research objectives have been met, including consideration of the value of this study.

6.2. Research objectives: Summary of findings and conclusions

Concerning research objectives 1 and 2, the literature review identified as a major objection against classical pluralisms that these approaches tend to ignore the significance of difference within interreligious relations (MacIntyre, 1985; MacGrane 1989). As a primary reason for this lack of consideration it was specified that unitary pluralisms like Hick's theory typically reduce religious differences to a common core (here: a shared basic belief in the *noumenal* Real) to create a unity among the world religions consciously transcending the particularities of individual traditions. Moreover, the closer analysis of Hick's pluralism in chapters 2 and 3 revealed that the specific view of religions as varying human interpretations of the one, ineffable Real, inherent in this theory, opens the door to cultural and religious relativism thereby failing to take otherness seriously (MacGrane, 1989; Van der Ven, 2006; Legenhausen, 2006, 2009). Similarly, with regard to the global ethics projects offered by Küng, Knitter or Ruland, it was argued that ethical pluralisms, envisioning a global ethical conscience stretching across religious boundaries, face the charge of moral universalism and hence might be viewed as theories incapable of recognizing the potential cultural particularity of moral values. Following Sacks's argumentation for the introduction of a new religious paradigm designed to replace both tribalism and universalism – the dignity of difference – chapter 3 therefore concluded that interfaith dialogue should no longer be viewed as a practice focusing primarily on similarities between religions, but rather as the art of reconciling difference. This, however, it was

specified, is difficult to achieve when dialogue is based on the theoretical frameworks of classical pluralisms. As Van der Ven's *emic* Christian reflections on dialogue with other religions revealed, pluralist theories – intent on providing an egalitarian account of religions – attempt to examine religious traditions from an exclusive observer perspective thus paying little attention to insider views on (inter-)faith issues and the potential particularities in belief and practice that they reveal.

Concerning research objectives 3 and 4, the critical analysis undertaken in chapter 4 showed that Legenhausen's Shi'a version of pluralism, designed as a non-reductive corrective to Hick's hypothesis and other reductive pluralisms, fails to solve the problem of difference and thus cannot be counted among the difference-respecting theories of interreligious relations. The first objection brought against Legenhausen was that his pluralism, based on the Shi'a principle of the general limitlessness of God's grace, is ultimately connected to (Christian) inclusivism in that it adopts the soteriological perspective that non-Muslims (mostly Jews and Christians) are potentially saved by the grace of God even though what Islam regards as a strict obligation of faith – the belief in the Seal of Prophethood – is not fulfilled by them. Although it was claimed that this view of interreligious relations is an improvement over Christian inclusivism because it centers on a more general aspect of religious belief (the mystery of the Divine) and is therefore accessible to non-Muslims without their having to adopt specifically Islamic doctrines, it sees non-Muslims as maintaining "incorrect" beliefs and hence cannot overcome the problem of superiority involved in inclusivism. On the basis of this way of thinking, it was further argued, fundamental differences in belief that undoubtedly exist between Muslims and Christians (such as varying understandings of the oneness of God) cannot truly be recognized by Muslims as equally valuable theological interpretations and must be

graciously overlooked instead. It was therefore concluded that Legenhausen's proposal of an Islamic, non-reductive version of pluralism, like unitary and ethical pluralisms, ultimately fails to appreciate cultural and religious differences as invaluable resources for interfaith dialogue.

This led us to another, rather unexpected conclusion, namely that Legenhausen's theory, although presuming to provide motivation for tolerance without having to reduce irreconcilable differences to the lowest common denominator, cannot really be viewed as a non-reductive theory of interreligious relations. The reason for this, as the second objection revealed, can be found in the concept of *qasir* (the incapable) used as a premise in Legenhausen's argument: Although Christians can be saved by the grace of God despite their "incorrect" beliefs in a religion other than Islam (according to this view of religions), this rule only applies to those "infidels" who are incapable of accepting Islam as their religion (e.g. because they have adopted the religious system dominant in their culture without knowing that they are 'making a mistake') and whose 'wrong beliefs' are therefore 'not sinful'. Yet, seeing differences in belief and practice merely as a product of "Christian incapability" rather than divine ordinance, for example, it was argued, ignores both the significance and the reality of those differences and hence does not produce a theory of interreligious relations that is truly aware of issues of difference and the roles they might play in dialogue situations. It was therefore concluded that in contrast to classical unitary and ethical pluralisms, underestimating the significance of *emic* perspectives on interfaith issues, this religiously specific approach, rooted in Shi'a theology, ascribes too much value to insider views, which makes it vulnerable to the charge of superiority.

6.3. Recommendations

In order to meet the final objective, chapter 5 was concerned with providing an alternative, difference-respecting, framework for interreligious dialogue that bridges the gulf between *emic* and *etic* perspectives produced by the theories examined above. Yet, to exclude the possibility that other religiously specific approaches to Muslim-Christian dialogue (not rooted in Shi'a Islam) might have the capacity to solve the problem of difference, this chapter provided first an analysis of two more *emic* Muslim/Christian views of religions – Sufi universalism and Quakerism and their mystical interpretations of the relation between oneness and multiplicity revealed in the principles of *tawhid* and "That of God in everyone". This led us to the conclusion that even though both traditions certainly have the potential to fuse insider and outsider views into a new metaphysical whole, they are ultimately too specific in their spiritual focus (mysticism) to be accepted as normative theories by a wide range of religions or even branches of individual traditions. Viewing religiously specific approaches like these as universally applicable, it was therefore concluded, does not do justice to the great diversity that exists both between and within religions.

As a final step, chapter 5 therefore recommended as an alternative approach to combine the best aspects of pluralism and religiously specific approaches into a new model for interfaith dialogue respectful of differences. Thus, it was argued that a model based on the notion of witnessing, like Ramadan's idea of *shahada*, has the advantage of offering room for an authentic expression of insider views on (inter-)faith issues without encouraging divisive practices such as proselytism or apologetics. Being in itself *religiously non-specific*, this model of witnessing provides a theoretical framework that is open enough to be adopted by members of different religions (and those coming from opposite ends of the spectra of individual traditions)

without their having to give up potentially conflicting truth claims or personal convictions. For it to have a unifying power similar to classical pluralisms, however, it was further recommended to combine the model of witnessing with a minimal ethical pluralism based on the virtues of humility, hospitality and friendship. These virtues, taken from Schillinger's and Ford's considerations and viewed here as culturally unspecific in their general interpretation, were chosen to avoid the charge of moral universalism that classical ethical pluralisms face. The overall conclusion drawn in this research was therefore that the model of witnessing, combined with a minimal virtue ethics like this one, has similar advantages as classical pluralisms (in that it motivates interreligious collaboration, for example) while also being capable of appreciating differences as important resources for interfaith dialogue.

It is important to note, though, that this presentation of a two-fold approach to interfaith dialogue, consisting of the components of witnessing and minimal ethical pluralism, is just the beginning of a search for a difference-respecting theory of interreligious relations capable, perhaps, of replacing Race's threefold typology. Specifically, the idea of a minimal virtue ethics, based on a fixed set of culturally unspecific, yet globally shared, moral principles, needs substantial interdisciplinary research to be put into practice. To take this study forward, it is therefore suggested to undertake further research (within the fields of religious studies, theology, philosophy of religion, sociology, cultural studies) examining the possibility of minimal ethical pluralism as a partial solution to the problem of difference.

6.4. Contribution to knowledge and concluding remarks

This research has contributed to knowledge in two main ways: First, as the literature review revealed, there is a significant lack of research focusing on the area of non-

reductive pluralism. Even though non-reductive approaches to interfaith issues are sometimes mentioned or even implicitly recommended as a basis for interreligious dialogue today (as Barnes's chapter in the *Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* suggests), the only non-reductive theory actually written out so far – Legenhausen's proposal – has not been sufficiently explored. The two objections brought against Legenhausen in this research project can therefore be viewed as partly original in the sense that objection 1 (establishing a link between Legenhausen's pluralism and inclusivism) investigates, in a more detailed way, what Barnes only hints at in his chapter on pluralism; and in the sense that objection 2 (the realization that Legenhausen's position is not non-reductive) ultimately evolves out of these considerations. The second way, in which this research contributes to knowledge is found in the way in which it makes specific recommendations on interfaith issues. While most of the existing theories, trying to provide an egalitarian account of religions, seem to aspire to be universal solutions to the problem of religious diversity, this research has argued that a combination of different approaches, seeing religious pluralism more as a complement to other models rather than an independent framework, might be a better way forward. This has the advantage that classical pluralisms, even if underestimating the significance of difference, can still be ascribed an important role within interreligious relations. When combined with the model of witnessing – already offering sufficient room for an authentic expression and appreciation of insider views on interfaith issues – a small proportion of disregard in matters of differences in belief, doctrine and practice (the extent of which is secured by a *minimal* virtue ethics) may no longer be such a drawback.

Chapter 7

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